

DISCOVER | EXPLORE | ENJOY



Annual Report 2023/24

Chair's Summary Report

Sara McClintock - Chair, Lagan Valley Regional Park Board

I am proud to share with you the Lagan Valley Regional Park's 2023/24 Annual Report. The Park continues to thrive as Northern Ireland's most popular outdoor attraction, welcoming 1.65 million visitors to the towpath alone in 2023.

We continue to, year-on-year, meet our goals, thanks to the collaborative efforts of our partners, including Belfast City Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, and to make significant strides in community engagement and conservation. Our new five-year management plan, launched in November, emphasises community involvement and the protection of our region's biodiversity and heritage.

Our conservation efforts remain robust, with a deep understanding of the river corridor's biodiversity and the area's importance as a wildlife refuge. We have undertaken vital conservation work across 15 sites, such as managing grasslands and controlling invasive species, and contributed valuable data to numerous national monitoring schemes.

Our conservation efforts are only possible with the help of volunteers, and the support of the local community, who are at the heart of the Regional Park.

As a board, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Dr. Andy Bridge and his dedicated team of rangers and coordinators for their tireless efforts in safeguarding the park. Our volunteers, embodying the spirit of community and dedication, remain the backbone of our organisation, contributing 2,667 hours this year across all volunteer roles. We are truly grateful for their passion and effort.

We also acknowledge the ongoing financial and advisory support of our partners in local and central government. The Lagan Valley Regional Park is a vital outdoor haven for many in the greater Belfast-Lisburn area and a cornerstone of both Councils' green space strategies.

We look forward to continuing our work to preserve and enhance this unique natural and cultural landscape for future generations.



Our Vision

A Park which offers a thriving, diverse and valued riverside heritage that welcomes exploration, learning and enjoyment whilst ensuring a sustainable environment for all.

The Regional Park's Strategic Vision clearly defines our six focus areas of Biodiversity, Visitors, Community, Landscape, Heritage and Health & Recreation.

Our Aims

- **Conserve and manage biodiversity in the Park**
- **Facilitate research and education about the area's biodiversity and heritage**
- **Encourage community involvement and develop volunteering in the Park**
- **Maintain and enhance the landscape quality for the benefit of all**
- **Proactively conserve and manage the cultural and built heritage of the Park**
- **Promote the health and wellbeing benefits of our green open spaces**
- **Support appropriate recreation activities, events and the development of sustainable tourism for the benefit of the region**
- **Increase public awareness of our natural and cultural heritage**

Outstanding Natural Beauty

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a precious landscape where the distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the public interest to safeguard it. The Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order 1985 sets out the main purposes of an AONB:

- **To conserve and enhance the natural beauty or amenities of the area**
- **To conserve wildlife, historic objects or natural phenomena within the area**
- **To promote enjoyment by the public**
- **To provide or maintain public access to the area**

From these purposes our Mission emerges: to protect and conserve the unique landscape character of Lagan Valley Regional Park and the Lagan Valley AONB, to enhance its biodiversity and cultural heritage, and to promote its benefit to visitors and the community.



Partnership

Good partnerships are essential to the governance and management of the Regional Park.

Working with our partners we have achieved all the goals laid out in the management plan for this year. It is thanks to the coordinated effort of our partners that we have achieved so much. Both Belfast City Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council are major landowners and manage significant sites in the Regional Park.

In addition to our funding partners there are a number of other bodies and organisations with which Lagan Valley Regional Park works. DfI Rivers is responsible for work along the river system and they provide services such as grass cutting along the towpath. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' Forest Service manages Belvoir Park Forest and the National Trust manages the Minnowburn site.

Our Funding Partners

Working together in partnership means that all partners benefit from the synergy created by matching contributions to the pot. The idea of synergy, where the creation of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, is particularly relevant. We seek to continue that approach with our partners in the future. Our key funding partners are/have been:

Belfast City Council
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council
Department for Infrastructure (DfI)
Department for Communities (DfC)
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)
HLF (Heritage Lottery Fund) Legacy

Department for Infrastructure (DfI) is a key landowner and has been an integral partner since the inception of the Regional Park and we would like to thank them for their long-term funding support and commitment over many years. Regrettably resource decisions within DfI have meant they have not been able to continue with funding this year.

Despite several years of prudent and careful budgeting and management, the loss of funding along with cost-of-living increases have meant this has been one of the most challenging years for the Regional Park.

The staff and board have responded by reassessing our focus and seeking innovative options that could steer the Regional Park through these challenges and into a sustainable future.

Our Other Partners

Our Management Partnerships help with delivery of specific targets, sharing of resources, training, joint management and project support. Our key Management Partners include: The National Trust, Sustrans, Forest Service (DAERA), DfI Roads, Butterfly Conservation NI, Bat Conservation Ireland, National Biodiversity Data Centre, QUB, DfI Rivers, Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (Lagan Branch), The Woodland Trust, and Ulster Wildlife.

Planning

Development pressure is as strong now as ever in the Regional Park.

Planning Activity

The Regional Park responded to 11 planning applications in 2023/4, reflecting the continuing development pressure on the river corridor, against which we must continue to be vigilant.



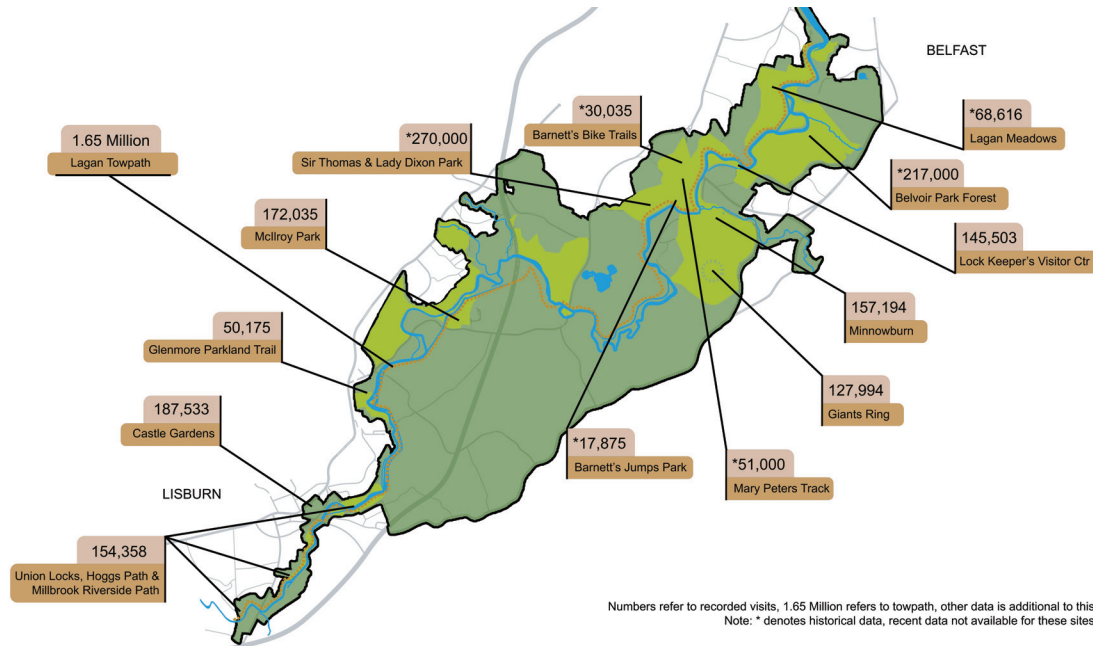
Local Development Plans

The Regional Park has consulted with Belfast City Council around the draft Plan Strategy for the Belfast Local Development Plan and with Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and we anticipate drafts of each being made available for comment in the near future.



Lagan Valley Regional Park

The most popular outdoor attraction in Northern Ireland.



Owned by the Department for Infrastructure, the towpath forms a cultural, social and biodiversity link between the cities of Lisburn and Belfast. It is a section of the Ulster Way, it is a 'medium distance walk' under Walk NI's designation and it is part of the National Cycle Network.

2023

128 Thousand Visitors
to Giant's Ring

157 Thousand Visitors
to Minnowburn

145 Thousand Visitors to
the Lock Keeper's Site

154 Thousand Visitors to
Riverside Paths in Lisburn

50 Thousand Visitors to
Glenmore Riverside Trails

23 Events Engaging
with 345 People

8 Community Events Involving
over 823 People

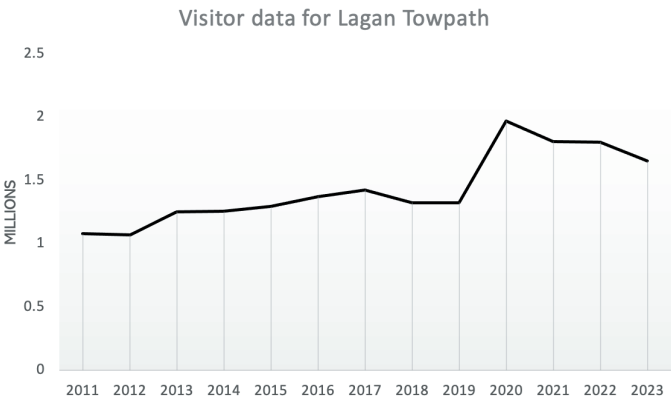


1.65 Million
Visitors to Towpath

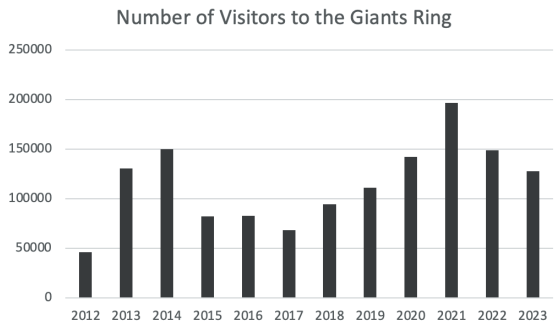
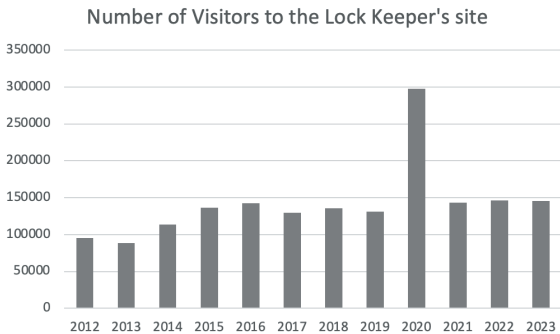
2023 User Survey

2023 indicates user numbers have started to decline and are now moving in the opposite direction to the program for government goals for increasing accessibility to green open spaces for all sectors of our community.

It is perhaps indicative of the need to continue investing in maintaining these spaces to secure their sustainable future and standard.



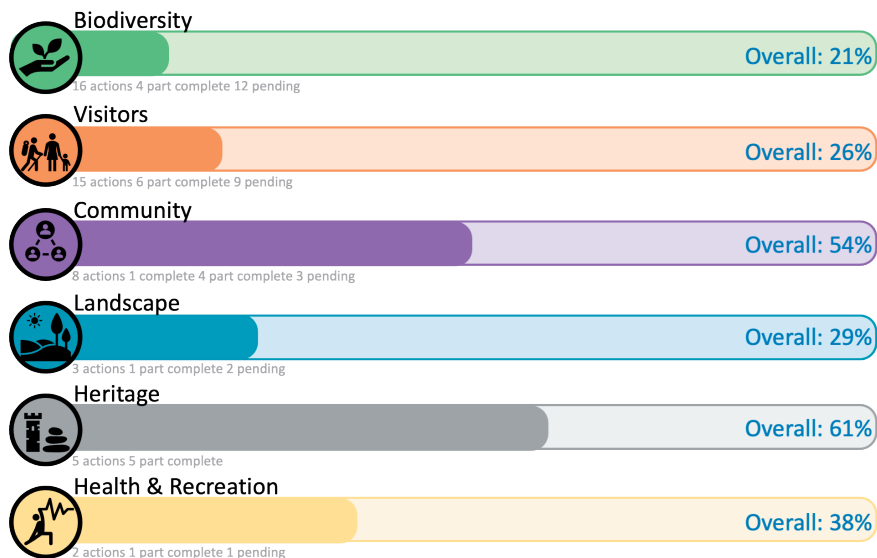
The Lock Keeper's site forms a useful hub to visitors with the Lock Keeper's Café, the Lock Keeper's Cottage, the Industry Lighter and the Lagan Valley Regional Park office.

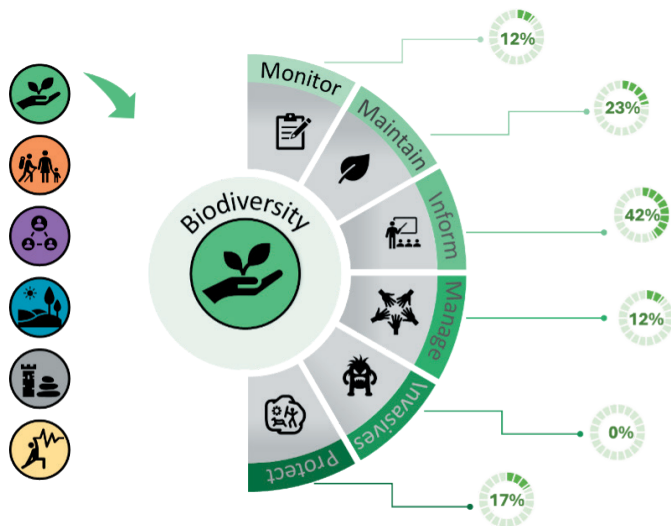


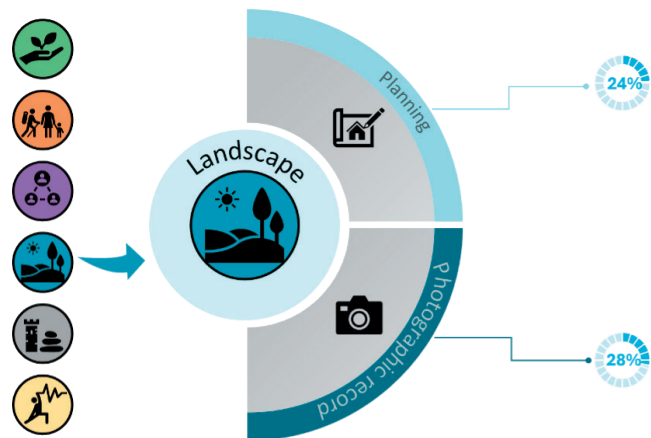
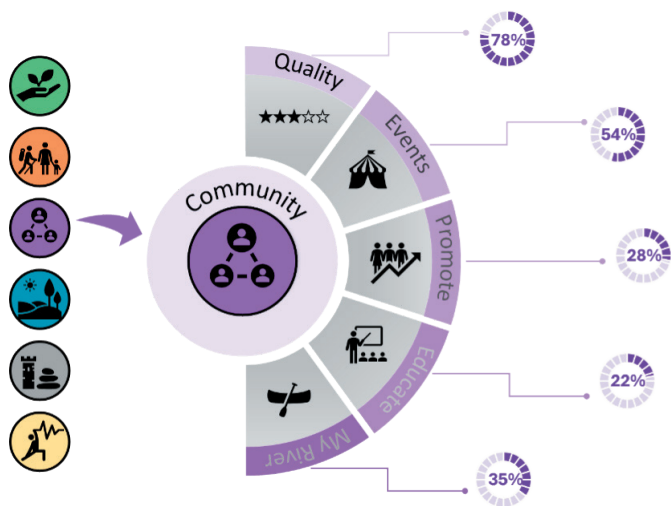
2023-28 Five-year Management Plan

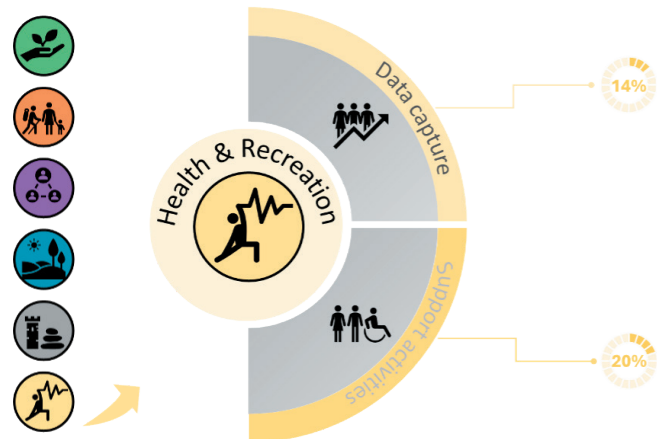
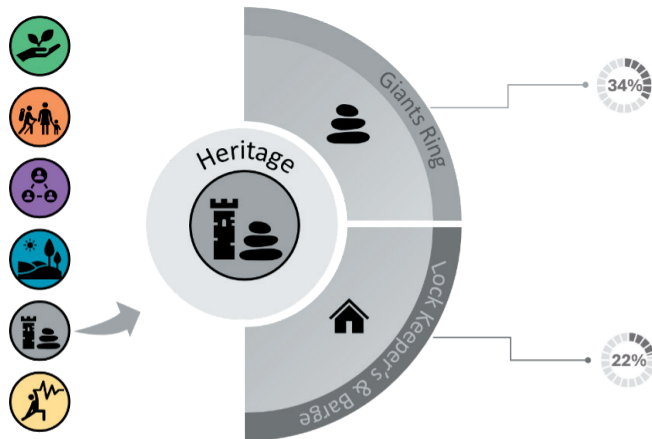
The Regional Park's new five-year management plan was launched in November 2023 showcasing the range of community involvement in the Regional Park and how this supports the protection of a dynamic and flourishing biodiversity and heritage in the region.

The full management plan and action plan is available under the publications section of our website and for the purposes of monitoring our progress we have developed the following progress gauge to visualise progress throughout each year.









The Giant's Ring

The Giant's Ring comprises a Neolithic Passage tomb surrounded by a raised circular earthen enclosure.

As a Scheduled Monument in State Care set in an Area of Significant Archaeological Interest it is one of Northern Ireland's most important historical monuments. In addition to the visible structures, the Ballynahatty plateau is scattered with archeological remains that have the potential to reveal more of the fascinating story of Ireland's early history. Increasing visitor pressure has resulted in erosion damage to the ringed mound which through liaison with HED is to be remedied through protective measures pending available budget.

128 Thousand Visitors Welcomed to the Giant's Ring

8 Conservation Tasks Caring for the Giant's Ring

Lock Keeper's Site

145 Thousand Visitors to the Lock Keeper's Site



Biodiversity

Guardianship of biodiversity has been a major theme in the management of Lagan Valley Regional Park since it was established in 1967.

Given the range of land managers and biodiversity issues, the challenge of coordinated management is significant. The conservation work of the Park is considerable and long term records have been greatly beneficial

to understanding the biodiversity of the river corridor. A key issue arising from our meetings to date is the need for comprehensive and scientifically robust baseline data across habitats and species.

Wildlife Surveying

Lagan Valley Regional Park rangers and volunteers play a key role in protecting the numerous species of wildlife in the Park.

As part of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, our volunteers and staff have been recording pollinators through two national monitoring schemes: the UK Butterfly Monitoring Scheme in partnership with Butterfly Conservation (3 transects), and the All-Ireland Bumblebee Monitoring Scheme with the National Biodiversity Data Centre in the Republic of Ireland (6 transects).

With 8 of Ireland's bat species recorded at Minnowburn, the Regional Park is an important refuge for this protected group. Volunteers from the Lagan Valley Regional Park complete six transects along the Lagan, a survey that has been running for several years now, providing valuable data for the All Ireland Daubenton's Bat Waterways Survey, in partnership with Bat Conservation Ireland.

78 Butterfly Survey
Walks Completed

72 Bumblebee Surveys
Completed

12 Bat Surveys
Completed

12 Volunteers Engaged Through
Wildlife Surveys



A Park with People at its Heart

The Regional Park has six key focus areas in its Strategic Vision, with our central focus being community.

We want a park that is people-focused, a place where everyone is welcome to visit, get involved and discover the Park on our doorstep. It is a place that connects the hearts of two of Northern Ireland's largest population centres and has strong links with community.

The Park has a great sense of cultural connectivity and links to its past. The Park is a hugely valuable resource and we will continue to develop events and other ways for people of all backgrounds and abilities to get involved. A thriving Park with community at its heart is also a great economic asset to the region, where tourism can benefit all.

Underpinning every aspect of the Regional Park are our volunteers; from heritage guides, to conservation volunteers and rangers, to the directors on our board. We could not operate without our volunteers. Likewise, our volunteers themselves speak of how involvement with the Park has benefitted them.

We extend a big thank you to all our volunteers for their hard work and continuing support through the year. As a testament to LVRP's commitment to community involvement and to delivering a high-quality volunteering programme, LVRP was successfully awarded its third reaccreditation of the Investing in Volunteers Quality Standard in December 2023.

2667

Hours Contributed from the Local Community Through Volunteering



Conservation Tasks

Conservation volunteer tasks are a great way for the local community to have agency in shaping and protecting this valuable public space.

From scything meadows with traditional scythes and 'haloing' veteran oaks, to controlling encroaching scrub and invasive species, alongside improving sites for visitors and removing litter from the river corridor, the weekly activities of the conservation volunteers are invaluable

in managing natural habitats in LVRP. Through direct community engagement, the biodiversity value of these connecting green spaces is developed and enhanced for the benefit of local communities and the Regional Park's many visitors.



40

**Conservation
Task Days**

15

**Sites Managed with
Volunteer Support**

24

**Grassland Management
Tasks over 7 Sites**

6

**Alien Invasive Species
Control Tasks over 3 Sites**

6

**Woodland and Meadow Management
Tasks in Belvoir ASSI**

Grassland Management

LVRP grassland management conservation tasks focus on two main areas; scrub removal and cutting and lifting annual growth.

Scrub is removed to manage the succession which degrades the biodiversity importance of grasslands. LVRP grassland management conservation tasks are carried out at the Giant's Ring, Belvoir ASSI, McIlroy Park, Lagan Meadows, Clement Wilson Park, Lagan Meadows and Sharman Road Green Space.

In the absence of grazing, grassland habitat must be cut and lifted each year, in much the way that hay meadows were managed in the past, using traditional tools such as Austrian scythes. Cutting and lifting the vegetation from a meadow improves biodiversity value by reducing the nutrient load and improving its sward (structure), allowing more species to flourish and preventing the grassland from becoming rank and dominated by coarse grasses, and nutrient-loving species such as nettles and docks. Maintaining and improving the quality of grassland habitat across LVRP benefits pollinators and other insects, and in turn birds and mammals, ultimately benefiting our visitors and local communities.

Upskilling and Training

Each year we schedule practical training for our volunteers to enable them to learn new skills, enhance existing ones and build confidence in their abilities. This year three volunteer training days were delivered for our volunteers.





The Ranger Service

Rangers are...

'The sharp end of the environment industry; skilled people who have to balance the demands, aspirations and curiosity of the public, with protection and enhancement of the physical and cultural fabric of the countryside, with sensitivity, humour and integrity' - Countryside Commission.

Your ranger service works tirelessly in the background managing issues, dealing with enquiries and complaints, liaising with partner organisations and landowners and delivering events. Patrolling the Park, the ranger service is effectively the eyes and ears of the Regional Park and its partners.



304

**Bags of Litter
Collected**

45

**Km of Paths and Trails
Patrolled Weekly**

875

**Hours Across LCCC,
1023 Hours Across BCC,
51 Hours Across Dfc (HED)**

62

**Incidents Responded to Including:
Wildlife Rescues, Emergency Flood
Responses, Public Safety, Assisting
Public and Visitors**

4

**Community River Cleans
on River Lagan**

2

**Community River Cleans
at Duncan's Dam**

6

**Public Relations Events Including:
Public Talks, Jobs Fair,
Stands at Conferences**

Economic Added Value of Volunteering in LVRP

It should be noted that as well as the practical hands-on volunteer help that supports the Regional Park, our board is also partly made up of volunteers who bring their professional experience and knowledge to the

behind-the-scenes governance of this unique area. The table below shows an estimate of the monetary value of this year's overall volunteer support.

Type of Support	Skill Level	Hours Contributed	Notional Value
Board of Directors	Professional	429.0	£20,021
Heritage Guides	Skilled	1079.5	£21,590
Wildlife Surveyors	Skilled	171.0	£3,420
Volunteer Rangers	Unskilled	379.75	£4,344
Conservation Group	Unskilled	607.75	£6,953
Overall Contribution of Volunteering During 2023/24 Financial Year			£56,328

Unskilled £11.44 per hour (national living wage), skilled £20.00 per hour (based on HLF recommended £150 per day – 7.5hr days) and professional £46.67 per hour (based on HLF recommended £350 per day – 7.5hr days)

Income and Expenditure

Prepared by Aubrey Campbell and Company, Chartered Accountants and Registered Auditors.

Income and Endowments Income	2023/4	2022/3
Northern Ireland Environmental Agency	–	£10,684
Belfast City Council - Core Funding	£67,000	£67,000
Belfast City Council – Earned Income	£15,104	£15,104
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	£66,061	£66,060
Keep NI Beautiful Grant	£2,195	£8,778
Department for Infrastructure	–	£42,000
Heritage Lottery Fund	£4,453	£4,582
Department for Communities (HED)	£5,982	£5,982
	£160,794	£220,191
Total Income	£160,794	£220,191

Expenditure on Charitable Activities	2023/4	2022/3
Wages and Salaries	£187,209	£158,771
Operating Leases	£1,705	£7,025
Rent	£5,750	£5,750

Rates and Water	£1,100	£596
Light and Heat	£3,960	£5,448
Repairs and Maintenance	£213	£834
Insurance	£7,614	£7,776
Other Establishment	£23,123	£4,343
Motor Vehicle Expenses	£5,386	£3,350
Vehicle Leasing/Hire	£870	£3,427
Legal and Professional Fees	£6,040	£6,040
Telephone	£294	£758
Other Office Costs	£4,588	£3,257
Depreciation	£4,046	£3,719
Other Interest Payable and Similar Charges	£150	£184
Detailed SOFA Expenditure on Charitable Activities Type 2H	£330	£324
	£252,378	£211,602
Total Expenditure	£252,378	£211,602

Net (Expenditure)/Income	£91,584	£8,589
---------------------------------	----------------	---------------



Lagan Valley Regional Park is a charity (NIC103700) and welcomes donations to help us continue to protect and conserve the unique landscape character of the Park, enhance its biodiversity, cultural heritage and promote its benefit to visitors and the community. You can find out more by contacting the office or visiting our website.

Lagan Valley Regional Park,
3 Lock Keeper's Lane, Belfast, BT8 7XT
T: 02890 491922
E: admin@laganvalley.co.uk
W: www.laganvalley.co.uk