

Sustainable Destinations: Piopiotahi Milford Sound Programme

June 2026 community engagement notes

For context see [DOC's June Piopiotahi Programme engagement presentation](#)

Piopiotahi Milford Sound community update

Date	16 June 2026
Location	Southern Discoveries Café, Piopiotahi Milford Sound
Attendees:	35
Topics:	DOC update, transport and spatial planning, access charging

Parking

- General support for DOC's proposal to increase paid parking for the whole village, but needs good comms and consideration for the user.
- Current paid-parking system can be viewed as punitive and can trigger complaints. This can have negative impacts for the wider Piopiotahi workforce – not just traffic wardens. .
- Concerns that expanding paid parking might exacerbate this.
- Strong support for a more user-friendly system and local permit options.
- Need to consider rec boaties and engage all with users early.

"We field a lot of parking complaints at the café. It's hard on staff."

Visitor experience

- Gaps in arrival experience (no clear "welcome" point or sense of place). Need for better signage and wayfinding.
- Reflection on the idea of slowing visitors down and encouraging them to pause and connect with nature and culture. Potential for this to conflict with current model of efficiently getting high volumes of visitors through to their cruise and then back out of the village.
- Accessibility needs – such as a more formal shuttle service within the village and drop-off areas - need to be considered if parking is limited and further from the terminal. It was noted that many customers do not like walking.
- Need for a covered waiting area in Deepwater Basin.

"We need a well-designed and culturally appropriate welcome sign: 'You have arrived'."



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Safety

- Safety concerns walking in the village – support for DOC's proposal to improve the walkway from Deepwater to Freshwater basin as a short-term priority.
- Airport pickup area challenging to use, would help to expand it.
- Ongoing concerns about road safety and vehicle speeds – with a call for an electronic sign signalling 30kpm speed limit at entrance to village
- Support for better use of the Milford Lookout Track as a tsunami evacuation point recognising it only serves a small part of the village.
- Workers are aware of natural hazards and made a choice to be there.

Capacity and environment

- The community highly value the area's natural environment and the importance of protecting this.
- Strong sentiment that Milford needs a clear capacity limit.
- Concern that without intervention it will become untenable.

"I lived here when it was all forest – it broke my heart a bit to see it cut down for houses and car parks."

Access charging

- Strong expectation that revenue is reinvested locally and not used for baseline
- Assertion that a charge means those who visit value the place more.
- Acknowledgement of charges as the norm overseas.
- General acceptance in principle, but:
 - Must be fair and not penalise workers/young people/low-income users.
 - Strong sentiment that cruise ship passengers should contribute in-line with other users given their high-impact.
 - Concerns regarding unwanted repercussions for other areas such as Doubtful Sound.
 - Need to ensure the value is clearly defined and communicated

"It [investment] needs to go into Milford Sound, period."

Cultural narrative

- Many have very little awareness of cultural presence/sites.
- Some desire for stronger cultural storytelling and recognition of heritage sites.

"It's important to be close to work ... we work 10-12 hours a day. If we're out of Milford we get more risk from travelling on the road."

Piopiota community needs

- Importance of close-to-work staff accommodation highlighted (safety and practicality).
- Strong sentiment that location, lifestyle and community are key to attracting and retaining the workforce in Milford.
- Need for a neutral, community space away from visitors.

"Top priority for the majority of people living here is living here! We don't make heaps of money, our bonus is finishing up work and grabbing a kayak."

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Te Anau community update

Date	17 June 2026
Location	Fiordland Community Events Centre, Te Anau
Attendees:	22
Topics:	DOC update, transport and spatial planning, access charging

Access charging

Broad agreement that visitors should contribute, but:

- Strong concern about multiple overlapping charges (IVL, fees, etc.) and cumulative costs for visitors
- Preference for one simple, transparent charge – separate to cruise boat trips.
- Acknowledgement of tourist contributions e.g. through GST.
- Potential for differential charges to spread the load
- Need to consider visitors making multiple trips over multiple days and cumulative effects.
- Concerns about impacts on wider area (e.g. Doubtful Sound) if the charge area is too small.

“The story you tell has to be the best sales pitch for conservation in the world!”

Story and value are critical

- Charging must be framed as an investment in conservation.
- Clear, visible examples of where money goes are essential for buy-in.
- Concern about funds being diverted away from Milford.

“It’s all about how you frame it. If they go home and tell their family – we paid this money and it’s going to pay for these amazing birds – then that’s an up-sell. Then it’s not so much a tax on them, it’s a way for them to leave something behind.”

Money should stay local

- Any revenue needs to be clearly seen going back to the place.
- Support for investment in Piopiotahi as a first priority, but also wider protection of Fiordland’s unique nature.
- Some benefit in an access charge (as opposed to a national charge like the IVL) is that it drives money back to place.

“If you charge, we don’t want to see bureaucracy and glossy pages. We don’t want the money to go on that.”

Several implementation challenges were raised including:

- Enforcement (especially for visitors leaving the country).
- How to distinguish user types (NZ vs international).
- Legal complexities (charging on roads, conservation land, water).

“Big problem of people getting ticketed and then leaving the country. You need on the spot options for non-compliance.”

Visitor experience and infrastructure

- Poor facilities and comms contributing to:
 - Confusion about expectations

- Inappropriate visitor behaviour (e.g. lack of toilets)
- Need for clearer guidance for international visitors

Transport planning

- Support for encouraging greater use of transport and guiding concession with this supporting economy and responsible tourism.
- Suggestion to control numbers through boat passenger limits and/or boat customers being required to travel by coach.
- Acknowledgement of the complexity and need to support the industry.
- Need to consider recreation and local needs for parking (e.g. Gertrude and Milford).
- Care needed around promoting afternoon visitation – with potential impacts around increased two-way traffic on the road.

“You have to incentivise use of concessions. The best experience is with a guide. This is true locally and internationally.”

Engagement fatigue

- Strong community frustration with prolonged, expensive planning without action.
- Concern that DOC delivery can be slow
- Question raised around level of community representation on the Programme Board.
- Desire for more tangible, visible improvements.
- Acknowledgement that the tide may be turning and things are starting to happen on the ground.

“If you’ve got local people, you’ve got people who are invested in the place and care about their legacy, for their families.”

“Car parks, toilets they are all happening. I can see now that we’re just at the point where we’re starting to see change. It’s starting to turn.”

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Queenstown community update

Date	18 June 2026
Location	Queenstown Events Centre, Frankton
Attendees:	15
Topics:	DOC update, transport and spatial planning, access charging

Access charging

Collection and distribution

- Concerns over “crumbling” infrastructure needing greater investment now.
- Strong concern about complexity and implementation burden if operators must collect fees. Risks to pricing structures (commissions, system changes, lead times). System should not sit with operators to administer.
- Preference for a simple mechanism that delivers clear and defined value, like a national parks pass, rather than added to cost of a boat tour.
- Suggestion that a better, simpler approach would be to use the IVL as it was originally intended.
- Important to ensure the charge delivers additional revenue for DOC, the experience and the place.

“Make it a national park pass. Then people know what they are paying for. Operators would be much more comfortable checking if people had purchased something like this.”

“There’s a lot of money at the border that could be going to conservation. That’s the easiest way to get the money.”

Visitor experience

- Would people need to pay to make multiple trips into the park?
- Any changes need to be well communicated with clear expectations for visitors.
- Visitors are likely to expect improved infrastructure e.g. better road if they are paying to visit.
- Concern that charging without visible improvements will damage local and national reputation and impact NZ Inc.

“There’s no way people will pay \$100.”

Consider whole tourism system

- Concerns raised about how different visitor charges will work together and be perceived by visitors.

“We need to remember that this is an experience of a lifetime.”

- Operators felt high pricing could reduce demand and undesirable behaviours like increased private vehicle use
- Incentives (e.g. discounts) suggested to encourage shared transport use.
- Need to engage trade
- Implementation method needs to consider the implications for coach and boat operators.
- If you make the charge for Piopiotahi only you risk displacement and wider impacts e.g. for Doubtful Sound.

"A lot of it will come down to the area you charge for. If it's only for Milford that could be disastrous for Doubtful Sound."

Transport planning

- Acknowledgement that operators already operate a park-and-ride system.
- Request to keep it simple. Pick an approach and get on with it.
- Operational realities:
 - Significant walk-up bookings still occur (up to 20%).
 - High variability in transport operations and scheduling.
- Interest in parking at the Chasm as an important staging point for timing coach arrivals into Milford.
 - Desire for the second car park to be reinstated to support coaches and help stagger arrival times in Piopiotahi.
 - Consideration needed for coach manoeuvrability in the car park.

"I don't think there's anyone in the room that thinks DOC shouldn't have more money to look after the place we rely on for our businesses. The question is how, and how that will impact what we do?"

"Needs to come down to a really simple mechanism – in my view bookable paid parking."



DOC Fiordland Lead, Grant Tremain, talks to the Piopiotahi Milford Sound community about DOC's visitor experience upgrades along the Milford corridor.