

Sustainable Destinations: Piopiotahi Milford Sound Programme

August 2026 community engagement notes

For context see presentation slides

Te Anau community update

Date	25 August 2026
Location	Fiordland Community Events Centre, Te Anau
Attendees:	15
Topics:	DOC update, transport and spatial planning, visitor experience upgrades

Key themes

- Strong support for improved visitor management and congestion reduction.
- Ongoing concern about parking, recreational access and boat user needs.
- Interest in future measures such as bookable parking and visitor caps to protect the place and experience.
- Strong desire to retain the 'White House' facilities.
- Support for greater DOC ranger presence, road safety improvements and enforcement where possible.
- The area is prone to natural hazards, planning and resilience are key considerations.

Managing peak summer

The group discussed a range of challenges and visitor management solutions for managing growing visitor pressures over peak summer. Views were expressed that visitor numbers may need to be capped at peak times. There was strong sentiment that visitor limits under the Fiordland National Park Management Plan should be actively considered and enforced. Discussion acknowledged DOC's limited ability to restrict access via the state highway.

Challenges



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- High visitor volumes need to be managed with recreational users now avoiding places along the road like The Divide during summer due to overcrowding.
- Tourism trends and volumes are hard to plan for and change quickly.
- Recreational users like boaties also need parking space – current provision not adequately surfaced/marked contributing to poor parking behaviours. It was noted that large boats 15+ metres (plus trailers and vehicles) need to be considered for future parking and facilities.
- Frustration with campervan congestion on the road.
- Safety on the Milford Road is a concern. Attendees requested that DOC continue discussions with NZTA/Milford Road Alliance.

“The Divide, we don’t go there... The way people park, why not have rangers there to improve the visitor experience and help people?”

Solutions

- **Bookable, paid parking** was discussed as a long-term solution at Piopiotahi.
 - Attendees stressed it would need to work for all user groups.
 - It was noted that this will take careful planning and time for recreationists, businesses and visitors to transition.
 - Recreational/local access – the group highlighted the importance of maintaining local and recreational access (e.g. climbers, boaties, walkers) and requested dedicated or exclusive spaces.
 - Attendees suggested prioritising better line-marking and surfacing for car parks.
- **Summer park and ride trial** - An update was provided on a proposed 15-day park and ride trial (targeting campervans and Te Anau walk-up cruise boat customers) to ease parking pressures and inform future transport planning. The proposed trial is for a free, bookable park and ride service from Knobs Flat and would include customer surveying to inform future decisions.
 - Questions were raised about locating the park and ride in Knobs Flat rather than Te Anau. The SDMSP team explained that a Te Anau service would require significantly more drivers, coaches, travel time and cost.
- **Joined-up visitor comms** – The group discussed the benefits of coordinating and targeting visitor communications to reduce congestion in Milford.
 - Questions raised about how visitors travelling from Queenstown and overseas would be targeted.
 - Suggestion to remind cruise visitors to plan ahead for limited dining options (e.g. after 8pm).
 - DOC advised that this summer, communications would focus on encouraging free independent travellers (FITs) to go by coach/guide, or avoid peak times and travel safe allowing plenty of time.
 - Attendees acknowledged that care was needed to avoid a perception that Milford is "full", while recognising the issue is more complex.
- **More DOC rangers** - participants felt an important solution was a greater DOC ranger presence at hotspots like The Divide, particularly to assist inexperienced visitors, ensure considerate parking and share local culture and nature information.

Visitor experience improvements/planning

Attendees were updated on DOC's programme of visitor facility upgrades along the Milford Corridor including The Chasm Walk, The Divide Car Park and Key Summit Track. There was a discussion on future use of the Milford corridor and what improvements people wish to see.

"Milford needs us to get back to the basics of power sewerage, water."

- Some participants expressed concern with the use of the term "visitor experience", feeling it did not reflect local use of the area.
- It was asserted that DOC's priorities need to be on getting the basic infrastructure right.
- People generally preferred development in Te Anau rather than in the national park (e.g. more or diversified accommodation along the corridor)

Deepwater Basin boat ramp and toilet upgrades

- Concern was raised about the loss of the 'White House' facilities (shelter and showers) once the new toilet facilities were built.
- Suggestion that boaties wouldn't mind paying for these facilities if they were well maintained.

Queenstown community update

Date	28 August 2026
Location	St Johns Training Rooms, Frankton
Attendees:	10
Topics:	DOC update, transport and spatial planning, visitor experience upgrades

Key themes

1. Strong support for improving visitor transport management, particularly reducing private vehicle impacts.
2. Need for better and more current transport data to support decision-making.
3. Broad support for a coordinated communications approach across tourism operators and transport providers.
4. Interest in encouraging coach, air and park-and-ride options through incentives and targeted messaging.
5. Recognition that behavioural change and future parking management will be challenging, but necessary to protect visitor experience and safety

Transport planning

- **Bookable, paid parking**

- Group acknowledge DOC must work closely with Milford Sound Tourism Ltd (MSTL), and consider integration with MSTL systems.
- Questions were raised about management responsibilities between DOC and MSTL for various car parks, including coach, boating and local-use parking areas. A bookable system may eventually apply across all parking areas.
- Participants noted that paid and bookable parking systems could be very challenging to implement and enforce.
- However, there may be opportunities to improve management through road design changes and greater control at the Milford turnoff.
- Changing long-established visitor expectations around private vehicle access will be difficult.

“Park and ride has been operating in Denali for 20 years – no commentary, just bare bones. People pay to use the service.”

“It’s almost impossible to control parking...people will decide to stay longer.”

- **Data and visitor trends**

- Group recognised there was a gap in transport data and trends and asserted more current data is needed.
- Visitor aviation activity has doubled since 2019. Generally flying 300 days a year.
- Coach day trips generally operate at or near capacity.
- Queenstown is now the second biggest rental vehicle market behind Auckland.

- **Road safety**

- Despite safety concerns and many near-miss incidents, the accident rate on Milford Road not high enough to trigger a response.
- Fatigue-related incidents may occur outside the Milford corridor and therefore not be reflected in Milford-specific crash statistics.
- Operators noted coaches frequently capture footage of poor driving behaviour.
- However, NZTA and other agencies generally prioritise crash data rather than near-miss incidents when allocating enforcement resources.
- Glenorchy Road was cited as a positive example of road design improvements that improve user experience.

- **Monitoring and compliance**

- It was felt there was an imbalance with more monitors and checks on passenger vehicles on the road compared to private vehicles and rentals.
- Some operators reported that DOC compliance notices could take a less combative approach.
- Rental vehicles are a growing visitor segment and an important lever in improving driver behaviour.
- Rental companies do check and respond to driver behaviour through GPS monitoring and contractual enforcement.

- **Proposed 15-day Park and ride trial**
 - The longstanding Denali National Park model was referenced as an example of successfully keeping private vehicles outside a protected area.

“Any communications needs to be culturally appropriate, cross language barriers and consider how each visitor from a different place travels.”

Collective communications opportunity

DOC is working to coordinate simple comms for FIT cruise boat customers that haven't made a coach booking encouraging use of coach, guides, flights, or safe and prepared driving, avoiding peak times.

- There was strong support for a coordinated communications approach that improves visitors' understanding and expectations before they reach Milford.
- There was support for ensuring PNR messaging complements rather than competes with coach services.
- Participants emphasised the need for communications to:
 - Be culturally appropriate.
 - Work across language barriers.
 - Reflect the different travel behaviours of international visitor markets.
- Operators identified a range of opportunities to strengthen visitor messaging:
 - Tourism operator websites.
 - Rental car companies, including information leaflets.
 - Public toilets in Te Anau.
 - Cafés and service stations.
 - Airport messaging boards.
 - State highway electronic signs.
- Additional suggestions included exploring opportunities to reach visitors through immigration channels.
- There was also interest in understanding whether AI platforms such as ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini could be influenced through the provision of authoritative training information.

“You used to have park rangers in there. They were great and made people feel welcome.”

Future Infrastructure

- There was general agreement that large-scale electric transport solutions remain a longer-term aspiration rather than a near-term option due to current operational constraints.
- Suggestion you could cover the coach parking area at the boat terminal to create a look out and shield passengers from weather.
- It was flagged that the aerodrome drop-off/turning area needed to be expanded and a shelter provided for customers.

International Visitor Access Charge (IVAC)

- Operators expressed strong opposition to being responsible for collecting the charge.
- Differential pricing (for example, lower charges for coach passengers) discussed as a potential way to encourage more sustainable transport choices.