

# Sustainable Destinations: Piopiotahi Milford Sound Programme

## August 2026 focus group notes

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| <b>Date</b>       | 25 August 2026                                              |
| <b>Location</b>   | Fiordland Community Events Centre, Te Anau                  |
| <b>Attendees:</b> | 13                                                          |
| <b>Topics:</b>    | DOC update, transport planning, visitor experience upgrades |

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### Meeting and group purpose:

Confirming long-term transport options and changing scope of focus group (considering options around the road corridor and Milford journey).

**Proposed purpose of group:** to drive solutions for tourism challenges and opportunities along the Milford journey and at Piopiotahi.

### Key themes

#### Transport

- Strong agreement that parking capacity, congestion and transport management are the key issues at Piopiotahi/Milford Sound.
- Ongoing concerns about driver behaviour, congestion, fatigue-related incidents and road safety.
- Support for progressing limited bookable parking as the preferred long-term solution.
- Need for flexibility in the system (e.g. for recreational users, workers and weather-dependent activities).

*"We already know that last year was beyond capacity. Our options are becoming very limited to things like pushing into the shoulder season."*

#### Capacity

- Crowding, congestion and parking pressures are affecting visitor experience.
- Some feel visitor numbers may need to be capped at peak times.
- Strong preference for a "quality over quantity" approach to tourism management.

#### Communications

- Consistent messaging across operators, agency, accommodation is supported.
- Key audiences identified were Queenstown visitors, rental car users, accommodation providers and independent travellers.

- Messages should encourage coach use, afternoon cruises, park-and-ride options and realistic travel planning.

#### **Support for action and trialling solutions**

- People are looking for practical action on transport and parking and visible progress.
- General support for the Knobs Flat park-and-ride trial and testing new approaches.
- Strong view that action should begin soon, even if solutions are not perfect, with learning used to refine future approaches.

*“Do something the sooner the better – it might not be perfect but we will learn.”*

#### **Planning needs a long-term view**

- Transport decisions should be linked to wider planning and future investment decisions.
- Stakeholders want greater clarity on long-term capacity, development opportunities and future visitor management.
- The tourism system is complex and hard to get ahead of. Mixed view of whether there should be more controls or focus on a system with the flexibility to respond. A mixed approach is probably needed.

## Workshop notes

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### **Transport planning**

The group reviewed the outcomes of the transport planning workshop which identified a preferred approach:

- Limited, bookable, paid parking at Piopiotahi with industry building extra the coach/shared transport capacity needed to support this.

This approach was previously agreed by transport group and has general support.

#### **Group discussion/stakeholder context:**

- Smaller coaches (12-15 seaters) are becoming more popular.
- It's a seasonal picture which is different at different times of year, so any research on transport options would need to be considered seasonably (e.g. Christmas brings more self-drive).
- There are increased loadings on the bigger coaches and shoulder season has flattened out significantly. Bigger coaches tend to be full over the winter where they previously wouldn't have.
- Fuel challenges have driven consolidated cruise timetables which leads to fuller coaches and boats. E.g. filling coach tank went from \$450 to \$850.
  - Great South's ongoing work on sustainable energy for Fiordland could be relevant.

#### **Groups discussion: should we be simply responding to the market or making changes to influence it**

- What we [tourism operators] do is just one part of the system – hard to plan for as driven by market forces.
- If we provide a suite of opportunities and experiences, the market responds. Look at the key levers we can pull to get a response.

- Can't predict a season as impacts outside of our control e.g. winter season can create more day trippers if not suitable weather for skiing.
- Boats aren't at capacity, coaches are. There are insufficient coach drivers to meet the demand at peak season (but right the way through the season as well).

*"If someone parks in the middle of the road – there is nothing anyone can do at Milford to enforce that. Control of carparks requires getting rid of informal areas and creating enforcement."*

### Parking inventory

- The group looked at a parking inventory at Milford, noting that Pembroke Drive (informal, overflow parking) is due to be developed.
- MSTL coach park is full on busy days. Plans to provide coach/van parking on commercial area in front of storage sheds.
- In last few weeks MSTL has run out of bus parking which is unusual at this time of year.

### Limited and bookable parking

Summary provided of existing knowledge about limited and bookable parking.

- Needs to operate for at least 3 months of the year to be financially feasible for operators (e.g. for them run more coaches/tours etc).
- Need 2-3 years to respond to new system. Flexibility in implementation and for rec users is key.
- 24-month turnaround identified to get new coaches (purchase, import, design, modify).

**Question:** are you clear on what the community's priorities are? (seeking to understand what stage we are at)

### DOC:

- The transport challenges/solutions have been well-canvassed with the community including congestion and safety.
- Other challenges MOP identified include:
  - Lack of cultural presence.
  - Unclear governance, complexity and processes for business owners.
  - Investment needed to support visitor experience, environment and biodiversity, community and wider region.

*"We don't need to look into the future, trends are clear, busyness of the place is clear. Coach spaces are limited, and our options are limited. Space is the limitation at Piopiotahi."*

### Discussion around challenges with implementing a bookable paid parking system

Three options described: soft rollout, delayed transition, or hard start.

- Issue still on the table is the wider economic piece, because a 15-day park and ride solution doesn't address the community's concerns about things starting and finishing here in Te Anau not in the park or down the road. Need to be careful not to stifle growth and development in Te Anau.
- The work needs to identify the optimal sustainable growth, modelling and design, enforcement, booking system complexity, access charging uncertainties.
- Concern raised that with an unknown future, and unknown growth and visitor numbers, how do we plan.
- What we can do is formal scenario planning (start in future and work back). We can identify trends rather than going towards an unknown future.
- Bus coordination is an issue – random buses turn up at all sorts of times without warning (from Te Anau hospitality perspective and MSTL parking perspective).
- Currently short-term peaks but random peaks and shoulder season can now occur.
- Premium cars are a new market – wanting good park to get to cruises (bookable space demand is identified as a current need for this market – they want the certainty).

- The upcoming election and incoming change of government is influential – impacts on what we can achieve. The work needs to deliver flexible and practical plans which are applicable to different circumstances.
- Spatial plan piece is missing, because it connects to the future planning piece.
- At what point is it worth going back to Government and asking about future of investment, considering the natural hazard risk – at what point is it no longer feasible to continue investing in a place?
- Strong appetite for limits on people going there. Quality over quantity preferred.

## Collective comms strategy

Discussion around the opportunity to nudge visitors towards more sustainable travel options at peak times:

1. Take a day off driving
2. Avoid peak times
3. Drive safe and prepared – allowing plenty of time.

### Group feedback/context:

- View shared that Department owns the comms – if we design it, companies will use it. However, it doesn't solely sit with DOC. SD-MSP described collective comms strategy plans in response.
- It's happening already – there's a consistent comms strategy for natural hazard risk in Piopiotahi now, so it's something we can build on.
- Comms need is in Queenstown. Key audience = accommodation providers in Queenstown, rental cars.
- Touchpoints (from before the person enters the country, to their arrival, to arrival in town, to drive to Milford, etc.). TIA, NZ.com, destination Queenstown.
- NZ travel website that supports people to do itinerary. Google maps showing times that are too short.
- There's capacity on afternoon cruises – stay in Te Anau, go on later cruise, come back for dinner. Te Anau accommodation providers have been pushing early morning cruises and that has filled these slots.
- If people are booking through a cruise company, just booking a cruise, should have information there that is visible and available. That should be part of collective comms strategy.

## Future mapping

DOC outlined work to create spatial plans for Piopiotahi and the Milford corridor building on MOP proposals but through a current lens. Stakeholder input will be valuable to getting this right.

### Accommodation

Accommodation raised as a consideration (noting limits under the Fiordland National Park Management Plan).

**Question:** Is more accommodation and different types of accommodation something people want or people feel is needed?

- Community support is high for tourism; we want to keep that support.
- The community is also conservation-minded, so too much development on public conservation land is confronting and challenging – our biggest opportunity is on the margin.
- Accommodation in Te Anau/outside the national park generally the preference
- Campsites are great for families and low cost
- Noted that resilience is a key component for tourism system.

*"Campsites are great because families can go there – they are reasonably priced. I can see a need for more high-end accommodation, but it needs to be balanced for the community."*

- Need to include ringfencing identifiable opportunities for private investment to come in and pick up a piece. E.g. RFP to build xyz type of accommodation.
- Spatial plans for Te Anau will be looked at next Monday – not yet online but will be available online in next fortnight.
- We will hear conflicting ideas and views from the community and different users.

**Question:** Why is the planning going to take a year?

**DOC:** Discussed potential scope and role of concessions. The transport system is the core of the plan and that requires significant planning and design. The intent is to produce a document which provides solutions and has broad support and buy-in.

*"We're never going to get it perfect – but if we don't try, we won't find solutions."*