

Sustainable Destinations: Piopiotahi Milford Sound Programme

Transport planning group hui notes

Date	23 March 2026
Location	Fiordland Community Events Centre, Te Anau
Attendees: 12	Representing: Great South, Police, Southland District Council, FENZ, MSTL, Milford Road Alliance, Trips and Tramps, Real NZ
DOC: 6	Piopiotahi Programme: Clare Stringer, Jock Edmondson, Lizzy Sutcliffe Te Anau District Team: John Lucas, Grant Tremain, Gabriel Vilgalys

Current situation and pressures

- Visitor numbers have exceeded pre-COVID levels (peak days up to 6,000 people), with continued year on year growth.
- Capacity issues are highly time specific and limited to peak summer. Congestion concentrated between 11:00am–1:30pm, while car parks are often underused by early afternoon.
- Safety concerns on Milford Road are escalating:
 - Road is technically challenging (narrow, winding, ice/grit in winter, distraction from scenery).
 - High volumes of overseas self-drive visitors unfamiliar with conditions.
 - Fatigue (particularly on the return journey) is a major contributor to crashes, with the Milford journey contributing to crash rates beyond the Milford Road (e.g. Queenstown–Te Anau corridor).
 - Limited cell coverage reduces reporting and response capability.
 - Near misses are chronic but not fully reflected in formal statistics.
 - Changes to current traffic flows could inadvertently lead to more crashes (e.g. increased two-way traffic throughout the day)
- Challenges have been around for a long time. Need action. Change will require a collective response.

“Milford Road is a technical drive... one mistake you have a crash.”

“You’ve got international tourists getting straight off a plane in Queenstown and into a rental vehicle... some don’t make it as far as Te Anau.”



- Police note behaviour change is difficult without enforcement. Only Police and SDC can issue parking infringements; SDC currently has no warranted parking officers.
- There is a clear Government expectation of unrestricted access to Piopiotahi. Full restriction, closure of the road, or a hard cap on total visitors are not on the table.
- However, there are several levers we can consider for visitor management.

Areas of broad agreement

- Problem is vehicle numbers, more than people numbers
- Reducing private/rental vehicles (particularly international boat tour customers) is the key lever
- Park and ride seen as a key part of the solution, though presents logistical challenges and people are mixed on whether this should start in Te Anau or Knobs Flat.
- Education and intervention must begin well upstream, across the whole system:
 - Rental car companies
 - Airlines
 - Online booking platforms
 - Inbound tour operators

“Not number of people it’s number of vehicles. That’s why we need to get more people on buses.”

Park and ride – key considerations

- Challenges:
 - Limited coach and driver availability at peak times.
 - Highly variable seasonal demand for this service
- Opportunities:
 - Smaller, hybrid or boutique park and ride models.
 - Public–private partnerships
 - Potential to look at national picture and redeploy drivers/coaches to/from other areas (ski fields, North Island etc)

Car parking management

- Strong support for parking as a controlled activity, make all of it paid and potentially bookable in advance (linked to cruise or activity bookings).
- Reduced car parks but only once viable alternatives are in place, otherwise visitors are displaced onto the road network.
- Need to prioritise concessionaires and buses in design.

Longer-term system issues

- Transport cannot be solved in isolation from:
 - Accommodation availability for tourists, drivers and workers
 - Spatial planning and zoning
 - NZTA planning processes

“Pariora [overflow parking] good to do but it’s not changing the journey issues. If anything, we’re just adding more capacity for cars to turn up in the middle of the day.”

- Growth in airline, cruise and rental vehicle capacity
- Potential for Invercargill to become a new growth hub, adding further pressure if not planned for.

Actions and next steps

Strategic / policy

- Investigate Piopiotahi parking management as a key demand management tool.
- Gather more details on park and ride options (Te Anau / Knobs Flat), including:
 - Funding and concession structures
 - Seasonal scalability

Data considerations

- Why visitors choose to self-drive
- Rental car fleet growth projections
- Airline capacity trends
- True scale of near miss and wider incidents

"Buses were also full this summer. Lots came in a car because they couldn't get a place on a bus. Almost all of those people came between 9 and 10.30 am with car parks empty by 1pm. Boats were still not at capacity. About 80%."

Engagement and partnerships

- Engage with Queenstown stakeholders
- Have more representation from transport operators
- Strengthen coordination with:
 - Rental car companies
 - Regional planning
 - Inbound tour operators and travel platforms

Communications

- Compile and prioritise existing key messages for visitors
- Scope potential for a visitor behaviour change campaign
- Develop a joined up, systemwide narrative aimed at independent travellers, starting before arrival in New Zealand.

Open questions

- At what point does managed access (e.g. numbers cap) become unavoidable to protect safety and experience?
- How can alternatives to self-driving be made attractive and credible enough to change behaviour without formal caps?
- Who should lead and fund transitional solutions while long-term systems are developed?