



14th May 2021

Attn: Responsible Camping Submissions
Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
Via email: responsiblecamping@mbie.govt.nz

Dear Sir / Madam,

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE FREEDOM CAMPING IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Queenstown Lakes District Council (QLDC) would like to thank MBIE for the opportunity to present its submission on sustainable freedom camping. Unfortunately, the QLDC’s position is that these changes are insufficient to create meaningful change and improved freedom camping behaviours.

The Queenstown Lakes District offers a destination and visitor experience that is central to New Zealand’s wider tourism industry. It’s a district that values manaakitanga and takes pride in sharing its taonga with others. Most of the district’s residents understand the desire to be close to nature and to camp in a beautiful location and many value the diversity and character responsible freedom campers bring. There is after all, plenty of evidence to suggest that some of the visitors arriving as freedom campers, bring significant benefit to the economy.

QLDC welcomes freedom campers, but as the most popular freedom camping destination in the South Island, the district is committed to making sure freedom camping is well-managed. Placed under such pressure, the need to act as kaitiaki of the environment and control freedom camping effectively must be the highest priority.

The reforms proposed in this process will not notably improve freedom camping management in the Queenstown Lakes District, as they offer little beyond the provisions of the QLDC’s current bylaw. Whilst improvement of the self-contained standard and the increased ability to monitor and enforce is welcome, their impact overall will be minor.

QLDC recommends that MBIE revisits the Responsible Camping Working Group Report (July 2018) and considers instead an holistic review of the Freedom Camping Act, the Self-Contained Standards and Campground Regulations. The working group recommends a comprehensive approach to reform, which could ameliorate the position of districts under pressure. Anything less represents a significant missed opportunity.

QLDC would like to be heard on its submission. It should be noted that due to the timeline of the process, this submission will be ratified by full council retrospectively at the next council meeting.

Yours faithfully,

Jim Boulton
Mayor

Mike Theelen
Chief Executive

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 QLDC welcomes the opportunity to comment in this process. As a small district that experiences the highest numbers of freedom campers in the country, QLDC believes it can offer a unique and important perspective on this topic.
- 1.2 The residents of the district are often conflicted in their experience of freedom camping. Manaakitanga and taking “pride in sharing our place with others”¹, are central to the community and most people can understand the desire to be close to nature and camp in a beautiful location.
- 1.3 It is important to note that QLDC values the diversity and spirit that responsible freedom campers bring, when numbers are manageable. Furthermore, it neither disregards nor underestimates the economic impact of many freedom campers. For example, those who are on working holiday visitors often undertake work whilst freedom camping, contributing 12 times more to the economy than visitors who do not².
- 1.4 The Queenstown Lakes District is one of the top three areas in New Zealand for freedom camping and has the highest numbers in the South Island³. Placed under pressure by the quantum of freedom campers, the need to act as kaitiaki of the environment and control freedom camping effectively is a high priority.
- 1.5 It is important to also note that the district is currently in the process of developing a Destination Management Plan, which will aim for a regenerative approach to tourism, putting community voice at the heart of the system and ensuring that the visitor economy has positive social capital.
- 1.6 The time is now for change, before borders open and a wide spectrum of international visitors return.
- 1.7 This submission is structured across three component parts:
 - Part A – Summary and Context
 - Part B – General Comments
 - Part C – Detailed Comments on Proposals

¹ Vision Beyond 2050 <https://www.qldc.govt.nz/your-council/our-vision-mission#:~:text=Vision%20Beyond%202050&text=This%20progressed%20to%20a%20group,and%20representation%20from%20Central%20Government>.

² QLDC Infographic – What is the potential lifetime value of visitors to NZ? Prepared by Benje Patterson.

³ <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/immigration-and-tourism/tourism/tourism-projects/responsible-camping/results-of-the-201920-summer-research-into-responsible-camping/>

Part A – Summary and Context

2.0 Summary

2.1 The proposed changes may effect positive change for some parts of the country, but they are insufficient to ameliorate the challenge faced in the Queenstown Lakes District.

2.2 QLDC has instituted a bylaw which has effectively already delivered proposal One at a local level. The proposal will not reduce the pressure placed on the district by demand and volume.

2.3 In summary, QLDC takes the following position:

- Proposal One – supported with further recommendation
- Proposal Two – not supported
- Proposal Three – supported
- Proposal Four – supported with further recommendation

2.4 QLDC recommends that Proposal One is adopted nationally, as this will create consistency between districts and potentially reduce incidents that breach QLDC’s bylaw. Non self-contained vehicles will continue to be made welcome and accommodated at campgrounds with suitable facilities.

2.5 However, QLDC recommends that Proposal One is strengthened for territories experiencing high volumes of freedom campers, empowering them to proscribe the practice according to due process.

2.6 QLDC strongly supports Proposal Four, but urges greater emphasis on changes that will reduce emissions and improve disaster preparedness.

2.7 QLDC would like to see a more extensive review of the Freedom Camping Act, alongside a review of the (inter-related) Self-Contained Standards and Campground Regulations. The current review is too narrow and fails to recognise a system-wide approach to change. It is recommended that the findings of the Responsible Camping Working Group are revisited and considered in detail.

3.0 Findings of the Responsible Camping Working Group

3.1 QLDC recommends that MBIE revisit the findings of the Responsible Camping Working Group (July 2018)⁴ for greater detail as to the nature of the changes needed. The working group recommended a review of the following:

- A review of the Act to ensure that outcomes of a successful camping system can be achieved, identifying any changes or the need for a new statute
- A review of the administration system for the Standard for Self containment of Motor Caravans (NZS 5465:2001)
- A review the Camping-Grounds Regulations 1985.
- A review the compliance regime to ensure it is an effective deterrent to unwanted behaviour

⁴ <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/assets/6fd1e9b9d0/responsible-camping-working-group-report.pdf>

As well as these regulatory actions, the Working Group also identified three supporting actions:

- Guide and support councils and relevant land owners/managers in transitioning and managing the transition to the new system
- Identify how technology can be used in managing responsible camping
- Use data to support decision making, both at a local level, and at a national policy setting level.

3.2 QLDC believes that this current process has missed a significant opportunity to meaningfully act upon the recommendations of the Responsible Camping Group. Returning to these recommendations would drive better behaviours and consider alternative, innovative proposals that could better align with the recommendations of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment and the Climate Change Commission's draft advice to government.

4.0 QLDC's Current Approach to Freedom Camping

4.1 Campermate is the most popular camping application for freedom campers visiting the Queenstown Lakes District⁵ and the statistics it shares with QLDC consistently identify the district as a hotspot for freedom camping. The district plays host to a very high number of freedom campers throughout summer within a very constrained topographical area.

4.2 In order to manage this situation, QLDC is funded by MBIE to manage responsible camping in the district.⁶ However, this is a short-term solution to the issue and QLDC will not be in a financial position to continue without government support ongoing.

4.3 This funding has enabled the development of an innovative behavioural change model, developed in partnership with the Department of Conservation (DoC) and Land Information New Zealand (LINZ). These measures have significantly diffused public anger and enabled freedom camping to retain a degree of social licence with the community. Complaints relating to freedom camping dropped by a third between summer 2018/19 and summer 2019/20⁷.

4.4 This highly successful programme is scaleable and could be replicated elsewhere if funded by central government.

4.5 In 2019/20 the QLDC created two 'Responsible Camping Hubs', one in Wanaka and one in Queenstown. Both hubs were open during the daytime and provided toilets, showers, dump stations, dish wash stations and an hour of free wi-fi (traded for survey completion) for those in self-contained vehicles. In the same year, the Queenstown Hub hosted 9104 vehicles and Wanaka hosted 10,471.

4.6 The Hubs were attended by Responsible Camping Ambassadors, who helped to provide information and shape better, responsible camping behaviours. Central to the success of

⁵ 76% of campers interviewed by responsible camping ambassadors used Campermate as a primary source of information. (QLDC Responsible Camping Survey conducted by Versus 2019/20).

⁶ <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/immigration-and-tourism/tourism/tourism-projects/responsible-camping/responsible-camping-funding-recipients>

⁷ Responsible Camping End of Season Report 2019/20

this approach is an ethos that suggests the best advocates for responsible camping, are the campers themselves.



- 4.7 The priority for the Ambassadors is encouraging behaviour change in a friendly fashion. In 2019/20 ambassadors recorded 20,319 interactions with campers, of which there were 2,783 infringements (a reduction on the year prior)⁸.
- 4.8 There are also mobile teams of ambassadors that monitor popular freedom camping sites around the district. It's important to note that the size of the district and remote nature of its population centres presents challenges for monitoring, enforcement and effective education.
- 4.9 A 'give back' donation model is also in place, with donations helping to fund wetland restoration projects at Albert Town Lagoon and Matakauri Wetlands reserves. The success of this programme was disrupted by COVID 19..

⁸ Responsible Camping End of Season Report 2019/20

Part B – General Comments

5.0 Legislative Alignment

- 5.1 QLDC does not consider this review process to be sufficiently extensive and urges MBIE to urgently conduct a more comprehensive review of the legislation. This needs to be undertaken alongside a full review of the self-contained standard and the campground regulations (as per the recommendations of the Responsible Camping Working Group).
- 5.2 However, QLDC does acknowledge the improved consistency of approach between different jurisdictions that aspects of the current proposal will encourage. This will enable local authorities to manage freedom camping and camping holistically, encouraging people to use local campgrounds that are designed for all aspects of camping where available.
- 5.3 A nationally consistent approach is needed when applying the legal framework, messaging, branding and education for freedom camping. QLDC's regional neighbours have indicated they feel the same and a simplified national approach will be essential to success. The current model causes confusion from district to district.
- 5.4 The Department of Conservation (DoC) needs to be a more visible partner in determining the future of freedom camping in Aotearoa. Changes to the legislation need to align with the future direction of DoC's camping facilities, as their low cost sites help dissipate freedom campers across the district to sites appropriate for camping. Their ranger service provides another important touch point to educate and inform responsible camping behaviours.
- 5.5 If the review recommended by the Responsible Camping Working is delayed further, the chance will be lost to align with a revised tourism strategy and the re-opening of the borders to the return of a broad range of international visitors.

6.0 Community Perception and Positive Social Capital

- 6.1 As a destination, the Queenstown Lakes District needs to balance the needs of normally resident communities with those of visitors. The Destination Management Plan work will aim to listen to communities and help to build positive social capital around the sector, embracing the diversity and energy that our visitors contribute.
- 6.2 It's important that any legislative changes are not designed to empower small pockets of parochial or xenophobic bias, as this will be to the detriment of our current reputation as an hospitable, friendly and welcoming place to visit.
- 6.3 Prior to COVID-19 the communities of the Queenstown Lakes District were under significant pressure from high visitor numbers, more so than any other part of the country⁹.

⁹ Mood of the Nation Survey 2020, Tourism Industry Aotearoa <https://www.tia.org.nz/resources-and-tools/insight/mood-of-the-nation>

- 6.4 As such, social license for the visitor economy has been placed at risk. This is not due to freedom campers alone, but they have become a very visible focus for dissatisfaction amongst the district's communities.
- 6.5 It is important to note that irresponsible camping behaviours are not limited to international visitors and to those in hired vehicles. The MBIE discussion document focusses heavily on these groups of visitors and QLDC's data does not support this position.
- 6.6 In 2019/20 only a third of vehicles were hired, with the majority (64%) having purchased their own mid-range, self contained and non-self contained vehicles¹⁰. This suggests that more focus needs to be placed on lifting standards for vehicles that are currently at the lower end of the market, particularly in the private market.
- 6.7 It should also be noted that domestic campers and local residents are not immune from displaying poor camping behaviours too. QLDC's Ambassadors and DoC record their observations, which note that a small number of irresponsible New Zealanders also have a tendency to litter, toilet in the bushes and light fires in prohibited places. Without appropriate tools and resources to manage this minority, old issues and frustrations will re-emerge.

7.0 COVID-19 Lessons Learned

- 7.1 QLDC's experience during the pandemic has helped to shape its position, having provided dedicated spaces for freedom campers to lockdown safely (if self-contained) or be redirected to static accommodation (if not self-contained).
- 7.2 At Alert Level Four, QLDC required self-contained vehicles to have a "minimum of a dedicated bathroom and shower on board and the ability to hold all waste". This should be considered a minimum standard for revision to the Act.
- 7.3 In the aftermath of the pandemic and the closure of the borders, the district's campgrounds are facing significant economic challenges. Better control of freedom camping permissions would also drive greater usage of these facilities.
- 7.4 QLDC established a Regenerative Recovery Advisory Group to help provide strategic guidance to its Recovery Team. This group has been emphatic in its position that 'the time is now' for change and that an opportunity has presented itself to change the way the tourism system works for the better. With regard to freedom camping, this review needs to be far braver and bolder, driving behaviours and considering models that will contribute to the circular economy and reduce emissions.

¹⁰ QLDC Responsible Camping Survey conducted by Versus 2019/20

PART THREE - DETAILED COMMENTS

8.0 Proposal One – Supported with Further Recommendation

8.1 Due to its Bylaw, QLDC already operates according to Proposal One within its territorial boundaries.

8.2 This review does not achieve any improvement for the Queenstown Lakes District, but may be adequate for other parts of the country as an absolute minimum. This would ensure that visitors arriving in the district would have a consistent understanding of acceptable practice and thereby potentially reduce QLDC's enforcement costs.

Recommendations:

- That Proposal One is adopted nationally, but that local authorities experiencing high volumes of freedom campers are empowered to proscribe the practice entirely during all or parts of the year, for tents and vehicles alike.
- Local authorities must be able to provide data to support their case for proscription, which should align with the parameters specified for the requirement of a bylaw e.g. demonstrate risk to the protection of the area, access to the area and risk to the health and safety of visitors.
- Clarification is required as to the status of roof tents, hammock tents and bivvies.

9.0 Proposal Two – Not Supported

9.1 QLDC does not support option two, as any site providing toilets would be overwhelmed with non self-contained campers during the summer. It would also not provide sufficient consistency for those travelling between jurisdictions. For example, the QLDC bylaw already requires a standard far higher than Proposal Two recommends.

9.2 The exclusion of public conservation land and regional parks from Proposal Two would be unworkable, as the sheer quantum of freedom campers would result in these sites being overwhelmed by campers whether self-contained or not.

9.3 Proposal Two creates a greater range of enforcement challenges and may create an expectation that TAs will need to provide toilet infrastructure in a range of places.

10.0 Proposal Three – Partially Supported

10.1 QLDC welcomes the introduction of improved regulatory provisions.

10.2 QLDC supports the recommendation to levy higher fines in order to provide a good deterrent. Currently, the infringements are insufficient to cover the costs for activity across a large geographic area. Fines set at \$500 would make a clear statement that non-compliance is not tolerated, whilst covering the cost of enforcement appropriately.

10.3 Greater clarification is needed regarding enforcement on DoC, LINZ and Waka Kotahi (WK) land. Currently, QLDC has an arrangement with DoC to enforce on its land but the

arrangement is not currently in place with LINZ or WK. This would benefit from regulatory simplification.

- 10.4 QLDC supports the recommendation to collect infringement payment from vehicle hire companies. However, this does not address problems with payment collection from overseas visitors who purchase (rather than hire) vehicles for the duration of their stay. This highlights a significant issue with people being able to leave the country without having paid fines.
- 10.5 Tents present a challenge for regulatory authorities, as without a registration plate they are difficult to enforce and infringe using existing systems. They also often pose a health and safety risk at freedom camping sites that accommodate both tents and vehicles.
- 10.6 QLDC does not support confiscation of vehicles as this could result in significant unintended consequences, given it's somebody's home at that point in time. This is a considerable violation of individual rights and a decision that should not be taken lightly. Furthermore, this places the responsibility and costs of storage and eventual disposal on the local authority and ratepayers.
- 10.7 QLDC notes that clamping has proven to be an effective freedom camping control measure in the district. A release fee of \$200 is currently charged for clamping. This is in addition to and separate from the infringement notice issued under the Freedom Camping Act. Locations for clamping need to be in places where a reasonable level of service can be achieved, but this could provide a practicable alternative to vehicle confiscation.
- 10.8 There is an unavoidable interface between genuine freedom camping, people choosing to sleep in their cars (e.g. tradespeople on short term contracts in the district avoiding high accommodation costs) and homelessness. In light of this, QLDC recommends that freedom camping is defined as an activity conducted by people visiting the district for recreational purposes only, for a temporary period. Workers living in their vehicles should be redirected to campgrounds and alternative accommodation, whilst homelessness should be addressed as a socio-economic matter via other channels, regulatory mechanisms, support systems and legislation.

11.0 Proposal Four – Supported with Further Recommendation

- 11.1 QLDC supports improvement to the self-contained standard, but this needs to be effectively managed and enforced at a national level. QLDC continues to recommend this would be better aligned with a full review of the Freedom Camping Act and the Campground Regulations as per the recommendations of the Responsible Camping Working Group.
- 11.2 QLDC supports a WOF-type approach with regular mandatory checks, a national register and a register of those able to certificate vehicles.
- 11.3 QLDC contends that the type of toilet does not make a material difference to toilet usage and is something of a distraction to the policy issue at hand. It's the way that any type of toilet is used (or not) that presents challenges. QLDC's surveys demonstrate that people tend to only use their onboard toilets if absolutely unavoidable, irrespective of whether plumbed or not.

11.4 Campaigns to drive better behaviours will be as important to driving change in regard to toilet usage, as specifying the type of toilet that qualifies as self-contained. However, given this process requires specificity on the issue, QLDC recommends that self-contained vehicles should require a separately partitioned toilet and shower, with sufficient tank space to hold waste for a considerable period of time.

11.5 Issues of concern should not be limited to toileting, as QLDC is highly concerned with irresponsible littering, open fire lighting and grey water disposal. This review could be used to address a wider range of issues.

11.6 Any transition from one regulatory system to another needs to be clean with minimal overlap of timelines and jurisdictional responsibilities. Previous changes to the Self Contained standard resulted in an extension of a failed system, overlap and confusion.

Recommendations:

QLDC urges MBIE to go further in its self-contained standard definition, so as to drive behaviours that improve disaster preparedness, transition toward a more sustainable tourism system and reduce emissions too:

- Require all self-contained vehicles to have an emergency preparedness kit or grab bag for use in the event of an emergency. As a highly seismically district, with the threat of AF8 looming, this would contribute significantly to visitor resilience.
- Require self-contained hire vehicles to be electric. This would align with the Climate Change Commission's recent advice to government in the pursuit of net carbon zero by 2050. In December 2020, just 2% of vehicle registrations in New Zealand were electric. This compares to 87% in Norway and 23% in the United Kingdom¹¹. The vehicles – and the technologies are already available to achieve this.
- Require all self-contained hire vehicles to run ancillary power from solar panels.
- Incentivise owned, self-contained vehicle owners to improve and upgrade their vehicles to be lower emission.

¹¹ <https://www.transport.govt.nz/area-of-interest/environment-and-climate-change/clean-cars/>