

Holiday shuttle service a hit



By Jacie
WHITFIELD

AN experimental holiday shuttle bus service trialled over the Christmas and New Year period in the Tomaree Headland area has proven an overwhelming success, with organisers reporting demand well beyond expectations.

The free Tomaree Shuttle, operated in partnership with Port Stephens Coaches and ran from 24 December to 6 January.

Looping between Nelson Bay, Shoal Bay, Fingal Bay and Tomaree Headland to help manage congestion and parking demand in the region's busiest summer period.

The idea for the shuttle bus evolved from the Tomaree Headland Help Desk.

Over the Christmas holidays they clocked over 600 riders on one day.

Peter Clough from Tomaree Headland Heritage Group shared that it was "the most we have ever recorded over the last 3 years."

Residents and visitors alike embraced the service, with organisers noting levels of participation that exceeded initial expectations, particularly from those staying locally.

One community

supporter said the shuttle's success "shows the appetite for smart, community-led transport solutions in peak holiday periods."

Volunteer coordinators estimate that the shuttle took significant numbers of private cars off the roads, especially from Shoal and Fingal Bays, relieving parking pressures on already congested local streets.

Despite the shuttle's popularity, many locals believe the transport challenges around Shoal Bay and Fingal Bay run much deeper than a seasonal bus trial can address.

More detailed ridership data is expected to be released by the bus operator and Council in forthcoming reports.

Discussion with community groups and residents in late 2025, highlighted the following:

- Traffic and infrastructure pressures on the peninsula are increasing as visitor numbers grow year-on-year.
- Evacuation and emergency access remains a concern — particularly in light of extreme weather events that saw road damage to Shoal Bay Road on 1 August 2024 and bushfires near Wreck Beach on 4 September 2024.
- The ageing local demographic (with populations in Shoal and Fingal Bays roughly twice

the national median age, at about 3,500 residents according to the 2021 Census) amplifies concerns about safe and reliable access.

- Calls for additional road access into Shoal Bay have gained traction among broader community groups as essential to future planning.

These issues align with recommendations contained in the recently adopted Port Stephens Coastal Management Plan, which explicitly calls for further investigation into access solutions for Shoal Bay and surrounding areas.

Council documents from late 2025 show that Port Stephens Council considered a range of shuttle service options as part of the strategic planning for holiday transport demand. Options included variations in route length, service frequency, and fleet size. Many residents believe that while the shuttle service is a welcome and effective measure, it should be part of a broader, strategic approach by the Council

- Long-term traffic and parking management planning for peak visitor

periods.

- Consideration of complementary transport solutions such as expanded public transport links, and possibly ferry services.

- Bulk data sharing and feedback collection from operators like Port Stephens Coaches and their drivers, who can offer unique insights into travel patterns and demand pressures.

The Tomaree Headland Heritage Group also noted the failure of two previous Birubi shuttle initiatives, deemed unsuccessful.

Council reported the failure, "as evidence that community consultation and operational design are critical to transport trials'

success."

Organisers of this year's trial hope that the strong community response will lead to further trials, including during the Easter holiday period.

They are seeking a debrief with the Council that includes Port Stephens Coaches, Destination Port Stephens, and the Visitor Information Centre to review outcomes and identify what worked well, and where improvements can be made moving forward.

□ Representatives and volunteers for the Tomaree Headland Heritage Group, Grenville Stevens, Peter Clough and Leon Squires.

