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**A qualitative investigation into rail travel behaviour and
barriers to use in peripheral and rural areas: The case of the
Far North Line**

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Friends of the Far North Line

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Executive Summary

The Far North Line (FNL) is a critical transport route connecting Inverness with the northernmost regions of Scotland. Despite its potential benefits for economic growth, community connectivity, and sustainable travel, it is under-utilised. In partnership with Strathclyde's Department of Marketing, Friends of the Far North Line, ScotRail, and Network Rail, this study explores barriers and opportunities related to FNL usage, particularly among non-users. It offers recommendations to increase engagement and utilisation of the FNL.

Data collected through interviews with community representatives and field research underscores key issues: while the FNL is valued as a community asset, challenges, including limited service frequency, travel time inefficiencies, perceived cost barriers, and competition from road-based tourism have limited its use. Furthermore, despite the FNL's appeal as a scenic route, it struggles to attract tourists, with many opting for the popular North Coast 500 (NC500) driving route. Residents and stakeholders support strategic improvements, focusing on reliability, efficiency, and enhanced communication about the FNL's offerings, particularly in marketing its unique appeal and practical utility.

Recommendations include targeted campaigns to promote FNL's reliability and scenic appeal, collaboration with local businesses to create attractive travel packages, and initiatives that position the FNL as integral to community life and Highland tourism. Increasing awareness of existing discounts, enhancing onboard amenities, and establishing partnerships with active travel networks are also recommended. By focusing on these areas, the FNL can increase its ridership and reinforce its value as an essential asset for the northern Scottish communities it serves.

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Introduction

The significance of rail travel cannot be understated; it promotes economic growth, enables access to essential services, and provides a sustainable method of transport for the public. However, in many rural areas, the utilisation of and attitudes towards rail travel can differ significantly from urban settings due to various economic, cultural, social, and logistical considerations. This appears to be the case for the Far North Line (FNL) - the northernmost UK rail line from Inverness to Thurso/Wick, servicing 26 communities. Despite its sizeable geographic catchment, the FNL is heavily under-utilised. While there is an existing understanding of who uses the FNL, there is little knowledge of those not engaging with the FNL and the barriers to doing so.

While simple in concept, the range of potential factors adds much complexity to the situation. For example, policymakers and academics identify safety concerns particularly for women (Hsu *et al.*, 2019) and on intermodal transport (Coppola & Silvestri, 2021); lack of onward transport (Yashiro & Kato, 2019) and door-to-door services (Kluge *et al.*, 2020); a fragmentation of responsibility among transport operating groups (Lyons and Harman, 2002); perceived lack of resilience and potential for disruption especially in the wake of COVID-19 (Downey *et al.*, 2022); social inequalities and lack of social inclusivity (Dobruszkes *et al.*, 2022), complexity in fare structures (Anciaes *et al.*, 2019); and mental health and anxiety issues (Mackett, 2019) as just a few of the barriers to rail travel, many of which tend to be exacerbated in rural and peripheral travel settings.

Specifically, the project, a collaboration between the Department of Marketing at Strathclyde and Friends of the Far North Line, ScotRail, and Network Rail, aims to understand barriers to travel on the FNL among user/non-user groups. Understanding these factors will also allow recommendations to be made to understand better and communicate with these parties, increasing engagement and experience of the FNL.

To achieve this, the project will consult appropriate stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and tourist bodies, to gain preliminary insight into the problem and potential solutions. This will be followed by more in-depth interviews with regular, infrequent, and non-users of the FNL to understand their travel motivations and barriers to travel. This will be supplemented with researcher travel diaries to account for real-time behaviour and researcher observations to understand the structure of the FNL.

Data Collection & Analysis

A multi-stage qualitative approach was adopted to complete the project.

Stage 1: Desk research and phone interviews.

To begin with, the FNL was split into three segments: lower (Inverness to Tain), mid (Tain to Helmsdale), and upper (Helmsdale to Wick). This was done based on consultation with the clients and on geographics, population centres, and likely usage of the FNL.

As a starting point, all community councils along the FNL were messaged using community council email addresses – 24 in total, with 10 initially responding. After further discussion, seven agreed to talk further with a final sample of three selected. To represent the FNL, interviews were carried out with community councils in each section of the FNL; these were in Alness (A1), Brora (B2), and Thurso (T3)—interviews aimed to provide valuable insights into the service's current perception and challenges. The feedback highlights a complex relationship between the FNL's benefits and the realities that lead to its underutilisation. To summarise:

Alness: A Well-Used but Limited Commuter Service

The perspective from Alness was, for the most part, positive. A1 highlighted the importance of the FNL as a primary commuting method, most commonly used for travelling in and out of Inverness in the mornings and evenings. Considering the challenges of road travel, including parking difficulties and traffic congestion, the train offers a logical alternative. The commuter service is perceived to be well-utilised and generally well-regarded. However, infrastructure improvements at the stations, such as increased parking capacity, were suggested as enhancements that could improve the experience. While disruptions still occur, overall, the convenience of the service versus the potential for disruption makes it attractive for regular commuting. However, this enthusiasm appears to fade at other times. While one-off trips hold some novelty and the scenic appeal holds much charm, there's a reluctance to rely on the service outside of daily commuting needs. Instead, flexibility becomes vital for non-work-based trips, specifically weekend travel, and the train's lack of flexibility, due predominantly to fewer weekend services, discourages regular leisure use, with car utilisation often the more accessible alternative.

Brora: A Case of Inefficiency and Limited Usage

Much of the discussion with B2 was framed in the context of the town's decreasing and ageing population, the closing of several local businesses, and competing interests from stakeholders in the town versus on the outskirts of the town. Given this context, the stakes placed on the FNL as an economic and social asset were heightened. Despite this, B2 was forthright in expressing concerns about the viability of the line. Living near the railway, B2 noted how infrequently locals use the service, with empty trains often observed rolling past. The unique geographical challenges of Brora, compounded by inefficiencies in train travel, make the service unattractive for local trips. It was explained that by the time you drive or walk to the station, and wait for the

train, you'd have been quicker just driving to where you need to be. The inconvenience becomes even more pronounced for longer journeys, as due to the location of Brora, taking the train adds significant time when travelling south. Although Brora and other similar stops on the FNL see some benefits, these positives appear overshadowed by fundamental issues related to time and convenience.

Thurso: Reliability Over Speed

In Thurso, the concerns were slightly different. T3 also acknowledged the longer travel time compared to road transport. However, given that the road journey takes three to four hours, an additional hour wasn't perceived as a deal-breaker. Instead, reliability emerged as the critical factor affecting the FNL's reputation. Fewer trains were reported as running to the far north, and the risk of delays, missed connections, or cancellations is a more significant deterrent. The stakes are high, especially for older residents who rely on the train for important appointments, for example residents who would choose to take the train for hospital appointments in Inverness. Despite these issues, the symbolic value of the FNL was considered significant, with the service representing more than just a means of transport, but as a vital link connecting the remote North of Scotland with Central Scotland, fostering a sense of belonging for communities that often feel disconnected from activities in the Central Belt.

Common Themes and Key Takeaways

While each town has unique concerns, some overarching themes emerged from the discussions:

- **Community Asset:** The FNL is seen as a valuable community asset. Despite its shortcomings, it provides a critical connection that residents want to preserve and improve.
- **Under-Utilisation:** The FNL remains under-utilised, often for valid reasons. Issues like long travel times, lack of flexibility, and reliability concerns make it an impractical choice for many journeys.
- **Collaboration Potential:** Communities are genuinely interested in engaging with organisations to address the FNL's shortcomings. Residents believe in the FNL's potential and are willing to collaborate on improvements.
- **Beyond Transport:** The reasons for seeking enhancements extend beyond simply making the FNL more user-friendly for locals. There is a broader vision to make these towns more attractive for potential future residents and tourists, using the FNL as a tool for economic and social development and regeneration.

Stage 2: Field research, including personal diaries and face-to-face interviews.

Following stage 1, the decision was made to make two trips on the FNL to the upper and lower sections to conduct further interviews supplemented with personal observations.

In-depth interviews took place as and when opportunities arose resulting in around 40 unique interactions. As such, interviews were conducted with:

- Hotel workers (inc. receptionist, porter, waiter, owner)
- Transport users (coach & train passengers, leisure & commuting)
- Tourists (national & international)
- Local workers (inc. workers/owners in shops, cinemas, pub/restaurants, taxi firms)
- Local community members

Interview data was supplemented with data derived from personal observations, with the researcher undertaking two multi-day trips on the FNL – one with a base in Wick and the second with a base in Tain.

Insights were derived from interviews, stakeholder discussions, and comparative transport analysis with competing services, such as road-based travel options for buses and cars. Data collected reveals a series of interlinked challenges and perceptions that collectively impact the usage of this railway. These are summarised as:

Efficiency and Travel Time

- Perceived Inefficiency
 - Among the most frequently cited issues by residents and travellers is the inefficiency of the FNL, particularly compared to alternative transport modes. Data indicated that road transport, especially buses, is perceived as more frequent, reliable, and cost-effective for local travel.
- Impact of Route Geography
 - For longer journeys, the train route's inland detours significantly extend travel times compared to road routes. This inefficiency is particularly acute given the high stakes for essential trips, like hospital visits, where missed or delayed appointments can have severe repercussions.
- Reliability Issues
 - Data from commuter interviews highlighted that while the FNL's reliability is less of an issue in the lower third, further north, the limited frequency of trains makes cancellations and delays more disruptive, leading to a loss of trust among potential users. The potential consequences of missed services were critical deterrents, especially for those with tight schedules.

Cost Competitiveness and Community Benefits

- Cost Factors
 - Analysis of cost-related feedback highlighted local residents generally find train travel more expensive when compared with bus services, especially given the Scottish government's free bus travel benefits for residents up to the age of 22, and aged 60 and over.

- Discount Programs and Value Perception
 - While the Highland Rail Card offers discounted fares, the perception of its value is low. Stakeholders reported confusion over the discount structure, suggesting a need for clearer communication on the program's benefits.

Commuting on the Far North Line

- Primary Commuter Usage
 - The train appears well-used by commuters on the lower third of the FNL. This is especially the case during peak weekday hours due to benefits like avoiding traffic and parking costs in Inverness; however, demand is reported to drop significantly outside these times.
- Reliability Perception
 - Compared to other users/non-users on the FNL, lower-third commuters perceive the FNL as offering a reliable and appropriate service. Maintaining reliability and potentially enhancing service frequency is crucial to sustaining and increasing commuter satisfaction and demand.

Tourism and Scenic Appeal

- Scenic Value
 - The data highlights the FNL's reputation as one of the UK's most scenic train journeys, with the potential to attract tourists interested in slow, scenic travel through the Highlands. However, insights from hoteliers and local tourism operators showed that the FNL is underpromoted and overshadowed by the North Coast 500 (NC500) driving route.
- Barriers to Tourist Use
 - Tourist feedback indicated that limited onboard amenities, such as catering and seating reservations, detract from the appeal for long-distance travellers.
- Quality of Train Travel
 - The variation in the condition of trains servicing the FNL is a recurring theme among passenger experiences and can affect perceptions of service quality, especially compared to InterCity trains. Such disparity in train quality can create inconsistency in the customer experience, potentially influencing travellers' decisions not to use the FNL for leisure trips.
- Comparative Analysis with NC500
 - The success of the NC500 has shifted tourism focus to road travel, leading to fewer tourists opting for rail exploration. This pattern is reinforced by car-oriented marketing for the NC500, reducing the FNL's share of visitors to Scotland's northern Highlands.

Enabling Leisure Activities

- A Facilitator of Active Leisure Travel

- The area covered along the FNL provides countless opportunities for outdoor recreation and active travel pursuits. Most notable is the overlap with National Route 1 on the National Cycle Network and the Northern Pilgrim’s Way walking route, with many smaller sections traversable actively. While evidence was provided for this use, there appeared to be little general knowledge of these potential routes or how the train could provide a one-way passage – either out or return – to help individuals engage these travel networks.
- Transportation of Leisure Accessories
 - Insights, albeit in a more limited manner, indicated that the greater space available and the additional safety and security available on trains appealed to those transporting additional equipment, namely golf and cycling, required for leisure activities. Although limits on designated bicycle spaces were highlighted as a slight concern, it was insufficient to discourage people from using the service.

Community Perception and Symbolic Value

- Community Asset Status
 - The FNL holds significant symbolic and practical value as a link between the Highlands and Central Scotland, facilitating regional integration and connectivity. Interview data reflects strong community support for the FNL as a vital link to employment, education, and cultural opportunities.
- Reliance and Future Concerns
 - Feedback from residents underscores the FNL’s role as an economic and social lifeline. However, they acknowledge the need for proactive marketing and strategic support to avoid service reductions due to underutilisation.

Recommendations

To address these issues, the following recommendations should be considered:

Efficiency and Travel Time

- Targeted marketing campaigns for local non-users, highlighting and reinforcing the reliability and efficiencies of using the FNL. Alongside this, further promotion of the Highland Railcard and its benefits.
- A more user-friendly and accessible process when faced with disruptions, such as not having to physically attend a station call point to enquire about delays and replacement services.

Tourism and Scenic Appeal

- A focused marketing strategy emphasising the benefits of slow, sustainable travel is needed. Addressing the NC500's dominance requires creative campaigns that differentiate the train experience, showcasing the unique perspectives and connections only the FNL can offer.
- Efforts should highlight the FNL's role as a gateway to a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Flow Country and promote its scenic and cultural appeal.
- Better collaboration with local businesses and tourism boards to package experiences, such as rail-to-ferry connections to Orkney or hop-on/hop-off experiences.
- Where possible, ensure the experience is maximised, for example, by providing catering services and honouring seat reservations.

Enabling Leisure Activities

- A targeted marketing campaign that highlights overlap with active leisure travel, for example, the National Cycleways or the Northern Pilgrimage Trail, positioning the train as a means to traverse certain sections.

Community Perception and Symbolic Value

- Promote strategic dialogue and collaboration between stakeholders to raise awareness of the FNL's benefits, encourage usage, and lobby for investment in infrastructure.
- Strategic dialogues among all stakeholders to ensure long-term funding.
- Develop a culture that values the FNL as more than just a train line to ensure community support and enrich the Highland communities it serves.
- Work with communities to build some hype around the FNL, e.g., the FNL Film Contest, FNL Blog series, and FNL Podcast series.

A Better Understanding of Motivations of Travellers/Non-Travellers

- Given the variety of FNL users and potential users, a greater understanding of motivations is needed. The research recognised eight primary motivators (price, speed, convenience, reliability, journey risk, experience, novelty, and enjoyment). Large-scale surveys distributed through ScotRail and community councils should be used to create a typology of users based on these motivations to allow for a more targeted approach to FNL users.

Conclusions

The FNL offers essential connectivity for Scotland's northern communities but remains underutilised due to several logistical, perceptual, and economic factors. Insights from community interviews reveal the FNL's perceived inefficiencies and limited flexibility, which often lead residents and visitors to prefer alternative transport modes. These challenges are amplified by competition from the well-promoted NC500 route, underlining a need for strategic action to improve the FNL's appeal and utility.

This study highlights several conclusions.

Firstly, FNL's limited frequency and perceived inefficiencies constitute a significant barrier for users, particularly in areas further from Inverness. This affects all users. However, disruption manifests in different severities depending on the user and the purpose of the use; understanding these various user groups is vital. Secondly, the FNL's appeal is acknowledged but under-leveraged. Tourists' preference for the NC500 reflects a need for targeted marketing that emphasises the unique, sustainable travel experience of the FNL, potentially aligning it with outdoor leisure activities and regional attractions. Thirdly, the FNL is valued as more than just a transport route; it serves as a vital community link. There is strong community support for maintaining the service, with a recognition of the economic and social connections associated with it. Finally, increased awareness and improved communication around FNL discounts, active collaboration with tourism boards, and enhanced community engagement through projects (e.g., local blog series and events) could foster a culture of support for the FNL and drive higher ridership.

In summary, a strategic focus on efficiency, community engagement, and promotion of the FNL's unique value can reinforce its role as a lifeline for Scotland's northern communities and enhance its use as a sustainable, scenic travel option.

References

Full reference list available on request

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