



TRANSECTS

Transitions in Energy for Coastal Communities
over Time and Space

ENERGY TRANSITION ON THE ISLANDS: JUSTICE AND CHANGE IN ORKNEY'S MARITIME ECONOMY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Orkney has experienced multiple, overlapping marine industry and energy transitions over the past three centuries, moving from kelp production and fisheries to North Sea oil and gas, and more recently to marine renewable energy centred on the European Marine Energy Centre (EMEC). These shifts have repeatedly reshaped the islands' economy, governance structures, and cultural landscape. Each transition brought new forms of investment and opportunity but also created uneven local impacts, social adjustments, and dependencies on external actors. As a result, contemporary just transition debates in Orkney unfold within a context shaped by both historical legacies and current policy constraints [1, 2].

JUSTICE THEMES IN ORKNEY'S TRANSITIONS

1. Governance and Decision-Making

Governance arrangements have strongly influenced who benefits from Orkney's transitions. Historically, feudal structures concentrated power and wealth among landowners, limiting community influence [3]. In the oil era, the Orkney County Council Act 1974 granted the islands exceptional powers over harbours, planning, and revenue retention — enabling Orkney to negotiate disturbance payments and reinvest income locally. However, the current phase of marine renewable development is governed mainly through national-level planning, leasing and licensing frameworks. Local influence over offshore decision-making is therefore more limited today, leading to concerns about procedural justice and the ability of the islands to secure consistent, long-term community benefits [4].

2. Economic and Workforce Change

Transitions have brought waves of short-term employment followed by periods of contraction and instability. Early maritime sectors relied on seasonal and precarious labour, contributing to long-term outward migration [1]. Oil development generated substantial construction and operations employment, but much spending leaked externally, and long-term job security was limited once construction ended [2]. Marine renewables have supported innovation and local business activity, yet many opportunities remain tied to project cycles or external firms. Meanwhile, structural vulnerabilities persist: high fuel poverty rates, grid constraints, and pressures on housing and services reduce the degree to which new industries can deliver secure or equitable economic outcomes [5].

3. Community Identity, Culture and Sense of Place

Coastal identity, heritage and landscape are central to how Orcadians experience transitions. Fishing and maritime traditions have shaped island culture over generations. The oil era brought rapid demographic and social change, prompting concerns about cultural dilution and shifts in community cohesion. Today, marine renewable development continues to shape the physical and symbolic landscape. Concerns over seascape change, heritage protection and the visibility of energy infrastructure reflect a wider narrative: that fairness is measured not only in economic terms but also in whether transitions respect local identity, cultural continuity and the lived experience of place [6].

OPPORTUNITIES FOR A JUST TRANSITION IN ORKNEY

- There are several opportunities to support fairer outcomes from Orkney's ongoing energy transition. Strengthening **local influence in marine planning and licensing** would help ensure that decisions about offshore development reflect island priorities and cumulative impacts. This includes clearer routes for community involvement early in project design and more transparent consultation processes.
- Improving **community benefit pathways** is also important. More consistent, predictable frameworks for benefit-sharing—beyond voluntary arrangements—would help ensure that revenues and long-term value remain within the islands, supporting local services, infrastructure and resilience.
- Sustained **investment in local capacity and skills** is needed to enable communities, local authorities and development trusts to engage effectively with technical, regulatory and negotiation processes. This includes training, leadership support and strengthening community anchor organisations.
- Finally, integrating **cultural, landscape and heritage considerations** directly into transition planning can help ensure that new developments align with Orkney's identity, values and sense of place, while addressing persistent structural challenges such as fuel poverty, housing pressure and grid constraints.



Read the full report here



References

1. Struthers, J. M. (2013). *Broch Island: A History of the Island of Burray in Orkney*.
2. Seyfrit, C. L. & Hamilton, L. C. (1992). *Who Will Leave? Oil, Migration, and Scottish Island Youth*.
3. Barry, G. (1808). *The History of the Orkney Islands*.
4. Johnson, K., Kerr, S. & Side, J. (2013). *Marine Renewables and Coastal Communities—Experiences from the Offshore Oil Industry in the 1970s and Their Relevance to Marine Renewables in the 2010s*.
5. Watts, L. (2018). *Energy at the End of the World: An Orkney Islands Saga*.
6. Caballero, M. D. et al. (2023). *Energy Justice & Coastal Communities: The Case for Meaningful Marine Renewable Energy Development*.

