Don’t let North Sea expertise disappear before green jobs arrive, experts urge

The north-east risks losing the skills, businesses and infrastructure needed to power its green energy future, they say.



Managing energy transition effectively could hardly be more important for the north-east. Image: Shutterstock

By **Jacob Kvasnicka**

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Aberdeen energy experts have warned that a pragmatic approach to domestic oil and gas production is needed to manage the energy transition.

They say the UK risks losing an experienced workforce and critical infrastructure if the fossil fuel taps are turned off prematurely.

It comes as the north-east industry, which had been buoyed by the approval of the Jackdaw gas field, was left in limbo following last week’s Budget.

Westminster’s fiscal plan offered little in the way of news for the sector, while also raising questions over the funding of the Acorn carbon capture project near Peterhead.

A long-term vision for the energy transition

But Professor Paul de Leeuw and Professor John Underhill remain optimistic.

The directors of Robert Gordon University’s Energy Transition Institute and the University of Aberdeen’s energy transition programme, respectively, have welcomed the creation of the Energy Wealth Fund.

Announced alongside Jackdaw's approval, the fund is intended to channel tax revenues from North Sea oil and gas into renewable and low-carbon energy projects, supporting the green transition.

It will receive an initial £2 billion injection, with future revenues from the North Sea expected to flow into the fund over time.

"The UK has an opportunity to connect immediate energy security with long-term climate ambition – the fund is a very welcome step towards that goal," say the two experts.

"The priority must be a coherent, long-term energy strategy that meets today's needs while accelerating investment in tomorrow's energy system.



Professor Paul de Leeuw, director of the Energy Transition Institute at Robert Gordon University. Image: RGU

"The North Sea can play a leading role in delivering both."

They argue that Jackdaw demonstrates how continued domestic production can contribute to energy security while generating tax revenues to support the transition.

This pragmatic approach, they explain, could help reconcile interests that are often presented as competing.

"Government needs energy security and economic growth, industry needs investment confidence," they said.

"The workforce needs credible routes into new roles and evidence that opportunities will arrive in time.

"Meanwhile, those focused on climate action need faster emissions reductions.

“Linking revenues from domestic production to investment in reducing oil and gas dependence creates a clearer shared interest in delivering the transition.”

Protecting the north-east’s skills, businesses and infrastructure

Managing that transition effectively could hardly be more important for the north-east.

The region built much of its prosperity around the oil and gas industry, but its future will depend on how successfully it adapts as the sector declines.

It has all the ingredients to spearhead the shift towards a future of greener energy, including world-class engineering expertise, offshore operating experience and established supply chains.

But for the north-east to thrive, and indeed survive, that transition must be carefully managed and coordinated.

“The decline of existing activity and the expansion of new industries must be planned together,” say Professors de Leeuw and Underhill.

“Losing experienced people, specialist companies and critical infrastructure before replacement opportunities mature would weaken the UK’s ability to deliver the transition itself.



Professor John Underhill, director for Energy Transition at University of Aberdeen. Image: Aberdeen University

“The Energy Wealth Fund, alongside a coordinated and pragmatic approach to domestic oil and gas, could help bridge that gap.

“Investment must arrive early enough for existing businesses and communities to participate in the next phase of the North Sea’s energy development.”

The two experts believe the UK can turn the challenge of a declining basin into a national opportunity.

One that would see remaining resources and revenues, alongside existing infrastructure, supply chains and expertise, deployed to help build the energy system and industries vital to the north-east's future and the wider UK economy.

"The UK can demonstrate that energy security and climate ambition need not be competing objectives, and that climate ambition can be underpinned by industrial strategy," they say.

"Success should be measured by projects brought forward, private investment unlocked and skilled people retained."