



JUST-Systems

Case Study Profile

Aberdeen: Addressing Fuel Poverty through Retrofit and Community Wealth Building

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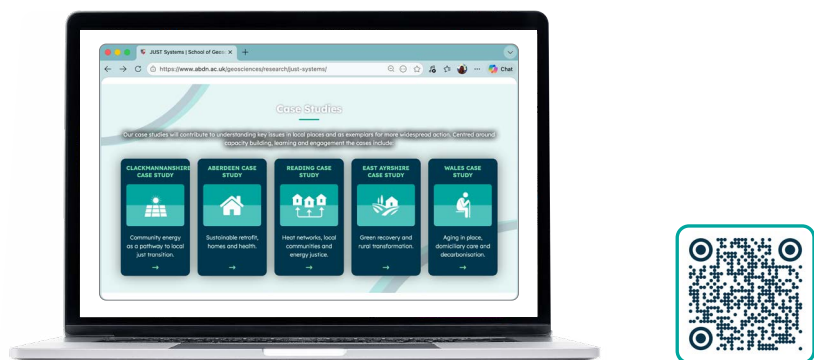
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1. Background

The JUST-Systems project (2025-2030) was developed in response to the UKRI Net Zero Challenges call, which supports original research programmes advancing the UK's transition to net zero with stakeholder engagement at their core. Our interdisciplinary team includes researchers from six universities, five UK case study partners, and an expert advisory board. Together, we aim to better understand the contexts and challenges of local and regional transitions and co-develop pathways for action.

This case study profile focuses on Torry, a historic community with a strong sense of identity, yet one that contains some of Aberdeen's most deprived areas, as identified in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. It explores how a systems approach to Net Zero can be co-designed to put the community's priorities, especially those of marginalised residents, at the centre, and to address key interlinked challenges such as fuel poverty, poor housing conditions and socio-environmental justice.

Historically, Torry has been one of Aberdeen's most productive areas, growing from a fishing village into one of the main districts supporting fishing and fish-processing industries after its annexation to the city in 1891 [1]. Over time, these industries declined and largely moved north to Peterhead. A large proportion of the Torry population shifted to work in a range of routine and entry-level occupations, often indirectly supported by the oil and gas industry. While oil and gas brought high incomes and considerable wealth to some Aberdonians and incomers, its benefits were very unevenly distributed. In 2016, Torry had the lowest median earnings in a city that also included some of the highest earners outside of London [2].

Following waves of immigration throughout the 2000s, mainly from post-Soviet Eastern Europe, the community has become increasingly diverse. The area's strategic location, within walking distance from the city centre and the harbour, along with a wide range of low-cost rental accommodation, has attracted newcomers and developers alike. Torry has long been subject to industrial infrastructure and redevelopment projects, with ongoing disputes over land use and limited green space. A new proposed development, the Energy Transition Zone (ETZ), is sited at Torry's only local park and greenspace, leading to considerable local opposition [3].

Further local disquiet has been instigated by the siting of a large waste incinerator around 300 metres of a primary school [4]. While the plant is designed to supply nearby buildings and homes, concerns persist over pollution and increased diesel lorry traffic to and from the site.

In addition, Torry faces a pressing need for housing retrofit due to high levels of fuel poverty and inefficient housing stock. Many homes in Torry (including old granite tenements and mid-20th-century council-owned flats) suffer from inadequate insulation and outdated heating systems, leading to unaffordable energy bills and cold, damp living environments. Further tensions have arisen over the council's plans to demolish 504 homes due to unsafe reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC), displacing residents and deepening perceptions of neglect and unfair treatment [5]. Torry's experience reflects a broader pattern of limited political agency within the local community and the need for stronger justice elements. This case study profile presents statistical evidence on Torry's socioeconomic, built environment, and energy contexts, outlining system challenges and offering a snapshot of relevant policy. Through JUST-Systems, we plan to support the establishment of a community-led retrofit project, co-developed through demonstrator projects as examples that can be implemented in local housing.



Figure 1: Aerial view of Torry, Aberdeen, from St Fittick's Park. (Photograph by Adam Thomas King/Shutterstock)

2. Location and Context

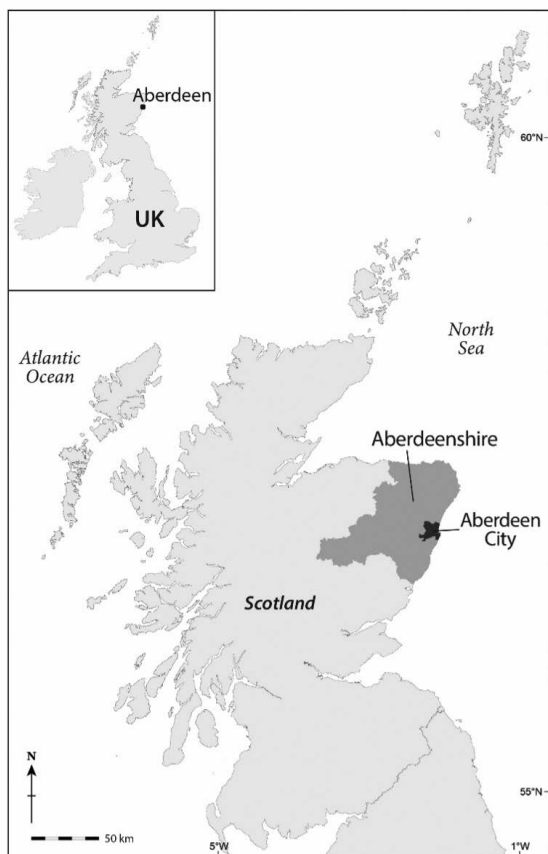


Figure 2: Aberdeen City location map (Own elaboration)

3. Data Profile

The following sections provide key insights into Torry's social, economic and environmental profile. They are critical for understanding the community's challenges and for developing an inclusive, systems approach to the case study.

For consistency, the data supporting this analysis has primarily been sourced from the Scottish Census 2022 [6]. Additional data were used where relevant.

3.1. Historical Background

Torry has historically been a fishing community. For much of the twentieth century, a large proportion of Torry residents made their livelihoods directly or indirectly in fishing, fish-processing and harbour-related activities [7]. Those origins as a fishing settlement and the boom years when its fleet and yards formed a major part of Aberdeen's fishing industry, are now largely a thing of the past. As the harbour economy has shifted towards oil, gas and, more recently, renewables, the local population has transitioned into other sectors.

Urban transformations have also marked Torry's more recent history. Its new, strategically defined role within the city's economic boom led to the disappearance of much of the old fishing village in the 1970s, which was gradually replaced by industrial and infrastructural sites needed to support industry expansion [7]. Local communities argue that, although Torry's role in the city's economic transformation has been vital, the distribution of the wealth in the city has not always benefited Torry or its residents [8].

Historically, considerable parts of Torry have consisted of low-cost housing intended to accommodate the working-class residents who have inhabited the area. Much of Torry's municipal housing expansion took place in the post-war period, and in the 1960s Aberdeen City Council approved the large Balnagask estate on the southern slopes of Torry Hill, further consolidating the area as a focus for council housing [7]. With persistently high levels of deprivation, Torry has also been the target of cyclical regeneration efforts over the years, seeking to bring it up to the same standard as the rest of the city, with mixed results [7].

At an administrative level within Aberdeen City Council, Torry is grouped into a single jurisdictional body with Ferryhill (Ward 12), a more affluent neighbourhood on the north bank of the River Dee (see Figure 3). In this profile, the data presented corresponds specifically to Torry.



Figure 3: Torry/Ferryhill (Ward 12) (Own elaboration)

3.2. Population, Households and Demographics

Population trends, age profile and migration

Torry has a population of 8,348, which represents 3.7% of Aberdeen City's population (224,000) at the 2022 Scottish census [6]. In turn, Torry's gender distribution features 49.4% of males and 50.6% of females.

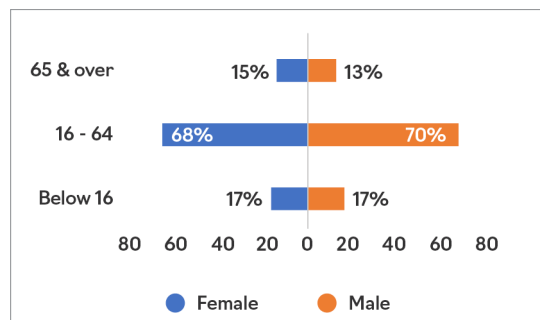


Figure 4: Age distribution by gender in Torry (Own elaboration based on 2022 Scotland's Census data) [6]

When it comes to age profile, Torry's residents are relatively young, with a strong concentration in working age. People aged under 16 represent 16.99%, those aged 16-64 account for 69.12% and those aged 65 or over make 13.9% of the population [6]. The age profile is similar for men and women, with small differences at older ages (65+). Among women, 17.02% are under 16, 68.19% are 16-64 and 14.79% are 65 or over; among men, 17.02% are under 16, 70.08% are 16-64 and 12.97% are 65 or over [6]. Taken together, this suggests a slightly younger male population, with a marginally higher proportion of women in the oldest age band.

The majority of residents in Torry were born in Scotland, accounting for 68.20% of the population. When considering the entire UK, the percentage increases to 74.27%, including 5.29% of residents from England, 0.44% from Northern Ireland and 0.32% from Wales. In contrast, 25.73% of Torry residents were born outside the UK, as opposed to 10.24% for the whole of Scotland – echoing Torry's tradition as a point of reception for migrant populations. Among those born outside the UK, the largest number comes from Europe (18.66%), followed by Africa (3.47%), the Middle East and Asia (2.55%), the Americas and the Caribbean (0.83%) and Oceania (0.22%). In the year leading up to the census, most of Torry's migration came from within the UK (9.75%), while only 1.75% came from outside the UK [6].

When it comes to length of residence in the UK, most residents with a migrant background reported living in the country 10 years or more (12.73%). This was followed by those who had resided in the UK for 5 to 10 years (6.86%), 2 to 5

years (3.61%), and less than 2 years (2.52%). While these data do not necessarily imply that Torry has been their place of residence during that time, these figures suggest that a significant majority of residents in the neighbourhood have a degree of integration with the country. In fact, at least 87% of respondents – including those who were born in the country (74.27%) – have lived in the UK for at least 10 years [6].

Ethnicity and national identity

The majority of residents of Torry perceive themselves as 'white' (90.83%) – this group includes white Scottish (65.99%), white other (20.09%) and white British (4.75%). The remaining 9.17% of the population is split into various ethnic groups: 'African, African Scottish or African British' (3.56%), 'Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British' (3.22%), 'Mixed or multiple ethnic group' (1.29%), 'Other ethnic group' (0.89%), and 'Caribbean or Black' (0.20%) [6].

When it comes to national identity, the population in Torry primarily identifies as 'only Scottish' (62.21%). While the remaining population identifies as 'only British' (6.9%), 'Scottish and British only' (4.45%), 'Scottish and any other identity' (2.61%), 'only English' (1.81%), 'any other combination of UK-only identities' (0.71%), and 'other identity and at least one UK identity' (0.4%). A considerable 19.59% of the population identifies as 'other identity only', a reflection of a culturally diverse community [6].

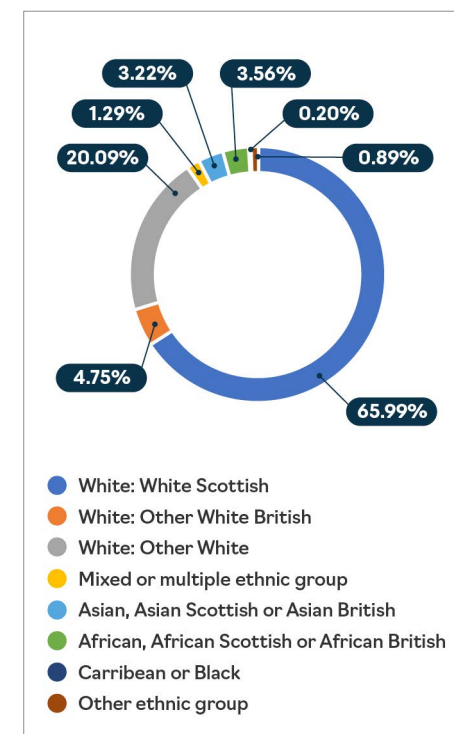


Figure 5: Share of main ethnicities in Torry in 2022 (Own elaboration based on 2022 Scotland's Census data) [6]



Household context and living arrangements

Scotland's Census reported 4,491 households in Torry in 2022. In the same year, there were 109,827 households in Aberdeen as a whole; at that point, households in Torry amounted to 4.09% of the city's total [6].

To describe living arrangements, the census table used here reports the distribution of individuals across housing types (not the distribution of households). On this basis, the largest share of Torry residents live in a one-family household consisting of a couple with dependent children (22.58%). This is followed closely by residents living in one-person households where the resident is aged under 66 (22.52%). A further 15.81% of residents live in one-family households of a couple without children and 12.63% live in one-family households of a lone parent with dependent children. Together, these four living arrangements make up almost three-quarters of Torry's residents [6].

The remaining residents are distributed across other configurations. Couples with only non-dependent children account for 5.87%, residents living in one-person households where the resident is aged 66 and over account for 5.67%, lone parents with only non-dependent children account for 4.89%, and one-family households where all members are aged 66 and over account for 3.73%. Finally, the remaining residents fall into other, less common types, namely other household types with dependent children (2.80%), and other household types (including full-time students and other households aged 66 and over) (3.49%) [6].

Religion

The majority of Torry residents reported having no religion (62.51%). Among those reporting a religious affiliation, Roman Catholics were the largest group, at 12.09%. Another significant faith present in Torry is the Church of Scotland, with 9.47% of residents. Smaller groups include Christians (5.95%), Muslims (1.58%), and other religions (including Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Pagan), which together represent 2.68%. Finally, 6.59% of respondents did not state their religion [6].

Language

In Torry, 79.83% of the population primarily speaks only English, while only 0.31% have Scots as their main language, and there are no residents who primarily speak Gaelic. Most of the population in Torry speaks, reads, and writes in English (84.02%), followed by 11.3% of residents who have varying levels of English proficiency. A small fraction, 0.98%, understands English but does not speak, read, or write it, and 0.69% of the population has no English skills at all. Additionally, 16.85% of residents speak a language other than English or Scots.

Although the data provided by the census does not specify which other languages are spoken, a 2016 report from Community Planning Aberdeen noted that in Torry West just over 11% of residents spoke Polish at home, while in Torry East this figure was slightly lower at 9.1% [2]. This highlights Torry's multicultural character, with a diverse population that includes a significant number of residents with roots in Eastern Europe.

3.3. Economy

Economic trends

In 2022, based on ONS UK small area gross value added (GVA) estimates, Torry's total GVA was £152.571 million [9]. This figure comprises Torry East's contribution of £65.317 million and Torry West's of £87.254 million. When compared to the rest of the city, Torry's contribution represents a small fraction of the total GVA for Aberdeen City, especially when it comes to other prominent industries with strong influence at a local and even national level. For instance, in 2021 the marine economy sector alone accounted for 18% of Aberdeen's total GVA (£1.7 billion) [10].

Nonetheless, the local impact of Torry and its potential economic development are emphasised by the recent sluggish economic growth of the city. Aberdeen is projected to experience the slowest GVA growth of any UK city between 2025 and 2028, averaging just 0.9% annually – a lethargy primarily attributed to a contraction in the energy sector and the city's lack of sectoral diversity [11].

3.3. Economy cont.

Economic trends cont.

The prospect of new investments in renewable energy to offset the loss of activity and employment is yet to materialise, a scenario in which Torry has been at the centre of the debate.

Torry has been proposed by the Council as a critical area within the city's emerging strategy in the context of the Net Zero agenda. The Energy Transition Zone (ETZ), an initiative aimed at accelerating Aberdeen's transition to renewable energy production, has been announced, along with significant investment from the UK Government (£17.3million). The project, which targets, among other sites, Torry's main green space, St Fittick's Park, seeks to position the city as a hub for renewable energy, with the promise of creating new jobs and reducing energy costs [12].



Figure 6: Entrance to the Port of Aberdeen and the mouth of the River Dee, viewed from Torry. (Photograph by Leonardo Ricaurte)

Income inequality

Reports by Community Planning Aberdeen emphasise income inequality in and within Torry as one of the main drivers of critical issues such as child poverty and lower life expectancy [2,13]. Addressing income inequalities, therefore, becomes a key priority for both the community and the local council.

When it comes to inequality in Aberdeen, the city is characterised by stark differences between high and low earners. In 2016, the median household income in Torry was £20,031, which is £10,704 below the city's median household income (£30,735). This disparity becomes even more pronounced when compared to more affluent neighbourhoods in the city, such as Cults, Bieldside and Milltimber, where the median household income reached £60,250 [2].

Within Torry, income inequality is also evident, with particular parts of the neighbourhood facing more challenging realities. Administratively, Torry is composed of two intermediate zones: Torry East and Torry West. Between the two, Torry East tends to perform worse on many economic and social indicators. For instance, the median household income in Torry West in 2016 was £22,496, while in Torry East it was £17,746. This made Torry East the intermediate zone with the lowest median income in the whole city. Furthermore, the median income in Balnagask, an area of Torry East with a high concentration of council-owned housing, equalled £14,722; by contrast, parts of Torry West reported almost double this figure (£28,829) [2].

The percentage of children in low-income families in Torry East (2023-2024) is 27.9%, while in Torry West (2023-2024) it is 28.7%. The figure for Scotland is 16.3% [14].

It is worth noting that inequalities are likely to have been exacerbated since the publication of these studies. The cost-of-living crisis and the economic implications of Brexit are felt more acutely in low-income neighbourhoods, particularly those reliant on Brexit-sensitive industries and European funding. Aberdeen City, with 9% of data zones identified in the most vulnerable category in the Brexit Vulnerability Index Map, ranks 27th out of 32 local authorities. Within the city, Torry features among the most vulnerable areas, reflecting its proximity to the harbour and the wider employment and economic implications associated with it [15].

Employment and economic activity

With the gradual decline of Aberdeen's fishing industry and the city's transition towards more profitable enterprises and sectors such as oil and gas, Torry's employment profile shifted from a strong concentration in the fishing, processing and harbour-related trades to a more diverse range of occupations.

The largest employment sectors in Torry are wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles (14.83% of those in work) and human health and social work activities (13.49%). These are followed by manufacturing (9.89%), accommodation and food service activities (9.43%), administrative and support service activities (8.84%), transport and storage (7.56%), public administration and defence, and compulsory social security (6.37%), and construction (5.33%). It is noteworthy that, despite the city's wider dependence on the oil and gas sector, employment in "mining and quarrying" – the category that includes oil and gas extraction – accounts for only 4.57% of Torry's workforce [6].

On the other hand, other industries employing less than 5% of people with an occupation include education (4.60%), professional, scientific and technical activities (3.64%), arts, entertainment and recreation (2.67%), information and communication (1.46%), financial and insurance activities (1.19%), and water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities (1.03%) [6].

Furthermore, based on the Standard Occupational Classification 2020 (SOC 2020), which has nine major categories grouped into four broad bands (1-3, 4-5, 6-7, and 8-9), 20.61% of all people in employment in Torry (2022) fall into the first band. This includes managers, directors, and senior officials (3.90%), professional occupations (7.90%) and associate professional occupations (8.81%). The second band, which accounts for 20.45% of those in work, includes administrative and secretarial occupations (8.48%) and skilled trades occupations (11.98%). The third band (21.17%) covers caring, leisure and other service occupations (12.21%) and sales and customer service occupations (8.95%). Finally, the fourth band comprises 37.77% of people in employment (the largest group) and includes process, plant, and machine operatives (12.48%) and elementary occupations (25.29%) [6].

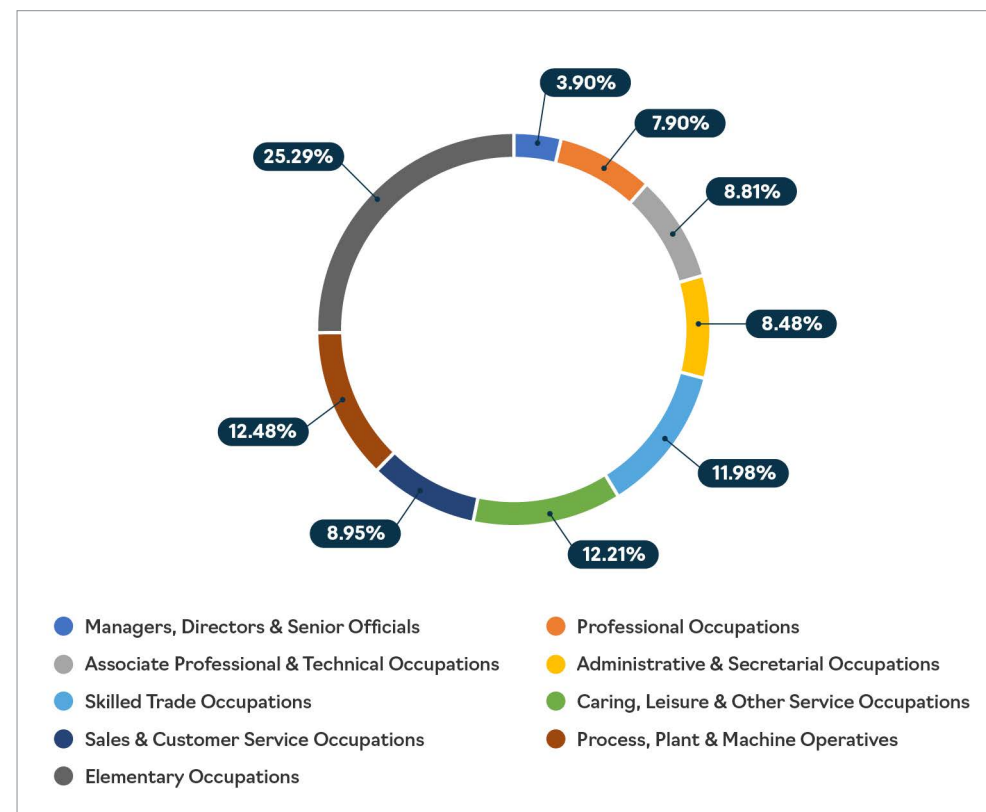


Figure 7: Share of main occupations in Torry (Own elaboration based on 2022 Scotland's Census data) [6]

The economically active people in Torry include part-time and full-time employees (47.11%), part-time and full-time self-employed (4.07%), and unemployed (3.91%). The economically inactive people in Torry include retired people (13.08%), students (3.15%), people looking after home or family (3.46%), long-term sick or disabled people (5.23%), and other (3%) [6].

3.4. Housing

Torry's housing stock is diverse, including traditional granite tenement flats – a very common housing typology in Aberdeen – post-war council housing in a combination of low-density houses and maisonettes (a high proportion of them built using RAAC concrete and currently affected by a demolition order) and several multi-storey blocks.

When it comes to tenure, Torry has a mixed profile, combining social rented, owner-occupied and private rented homes. Overall, 48.16% of households are social rented, 33.61% are owner-occupied, 16.51% are private rented, 1.72% live rent-free; owner-occupation includes 16.98% owned outright and 16.14% owned with a mortgage or loan [6]. Socially rented homes are managed by a combination of Aberdeen City Council and housing associations operating locally. This pattern is particularly pronounced in Balnagask (Torry East), where around four out of five homes are socially rented [13]. Table 1 summarises the main tenure types and their local characteristics.

Table 1: Characteristics of housing tenure distribution in Torry

Tenure	Characteristics
Social rent	High concentration of council-owned homes (multi-storey blocks and low-rise), including the 366 homes affected by the use of RAAC concrete in Balnagask Estate. In addition, housing associations like Castlehill Housing Association are also present in Torry with retirement housing in St. Peter's Court (31 flats) and a tenement block for general needs in Menzies Road. The social housing stock in the neighbourhood is under strain, as a result of the programmed demolitions in Balnagask Estate, which further exacerbate the generalised dearth of social housing across Aberdeen (6,658 applicants on the waiting list) [16]. Many of these homes, dating from the mid-20th century, require updates.
Owner-occupied	The area features a mix of traditional granite homes built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, alongside former council homes acquired via the Right to Buy scheme. Currently, 138 of these former council-owned properties have been earmarked for demolition. Homeowners have been given the option of voluntary acquisition, property swaps, or council tenancies. Many of the owner-occupied homes are inhabited by long-term residents with a strong attachment to the local community.
Private rent	Torry features a substantial private rental stock that includes former council homes and older granite tenements.



Figure 8: Examples of housing typologies in Torry, Aberdeen. Traditional granite tenement buildings on Victoria Road (left) and multi-family council housing on Balnagask Road (right). Together, these photographs illustrate the diversity of Torry's housing stock. (Photographs by Leonardo Ricaurte)

These estimates contrast not only with national trends reported in the 2022 Scottish census [6], where approximately 63.2% of households in Scotland were owner-occupied, but also with more recent data from the Scottish Government [17], which estimates 53.0% of households in Aberdeen are owner-occupied. This tenure profile – high rental shares alongside relatively low owner-occupation – helps explain Torry's role as an accessible entry point to the city for lower-income households, migrants and students, who benefit from its central location and convenient access to transport terminals, retail centres and other city amenities. At the same time, a strong rental market in Torry, both social and private, has a bearing on addressing housing challenges in the local area, such as fuel poverty and energy-inefficient homes. Privately rented properties can be particularly challenging to retrofit due to misaligned incentives and priorities between tenants and landlords [18].

Fuel poverty

Fuel poverty alleviation is a crucial issue for Aberdeen City Council. The city, as stressed in its Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy (LHEES) [19], presents higher levels of fuel poverty compared to the Scottish average. According to the LHEES (drawing on the 2019 Scottish House Condition Survey), just over 26% of Aberdeen's residents live in fuel-poor households [19]. The concentration of this challenge is, as expected, higher in the most deprived areas of the city, such as Torry. The ramifications for health and wellbeing of living in an inefficient home are multifaceted, and can have acute effects on many of the themes covered in this section of the profile. This challenge has, therefore, become a central concern for the City Council, which expressed a commitment to reduce fuel poverty and improve the energy efficiency of existing housing across all tenures – recognising that certain tenures, such as private and social rented, tend to register higher rates of fuel poverty [19].

The Fuel Poverty (Targets, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Act 2019 defines fuel poverty as a condition that a household faces when its required fuel costs exceed 10% of its adjusted net income (after housing costs) and, after paying for those required fuel costs, the household's remaining adjusted net income is insufficient to maintain an acceptable standard of living (set in practice against the relevant Minimum Income Standard threshold)¹. In addition, the Act defines extreme fuel poverty where the necessary fuel costs exceed 20% of adjusted net income [20].

In Torry, where a majority of the housing stock is rented, either socially or privately, fuel poverty and the retrofitting of homes have increasingly become a top priority for the community [21]. Torry has been included as part of a district heating network, which has gradually expanded its service provision since its launch in 2002. Across the city, most of the homes connected to this network are council-owned (3,684), while only 293 are privately owned [22].

Fuel poverty is directly linked to physical conditions of the built environment, in which poor insulation and airtightness, as well as inefficient and expensive-to-run heating systems, play a role [23].

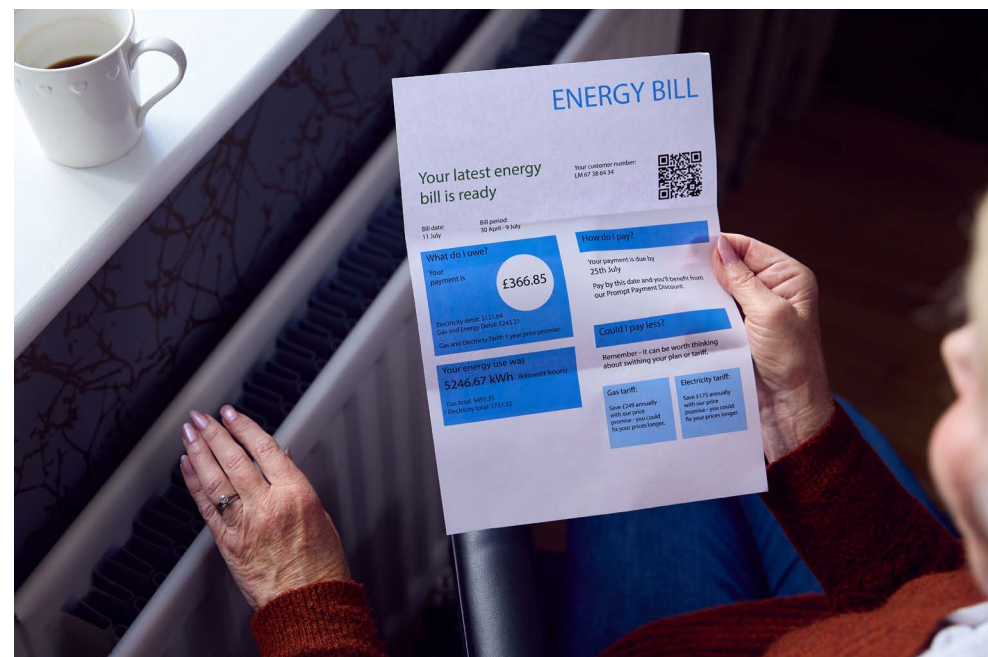


Figure 9: Fuel poverty is a significant challenge in Aberdeen, affecting over 26% of residents. Areas with higher levels of deprivation, including parts of Torry, are particularly vulnerable to this issue. (Photograph by Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock)

In Torry, 79.96% of households have gas central heating installed in their homes, rendering them vulnerable to high and volatile gas prices. In addition, 8.09% of households use electric central heating, which is typically more expensive to run than gas [24]. A further 5.53% of households reported using two or more types of central heating. Although a minority, the 3.57% of households that reported having no central heating at all is still a concerning figure: in absolute terms, this corresponds to 160 households living in homes that are acutely exposed to cold, damp, condensation, mould growth and the associated health risks [6].

¹ The NHS recommends maintaining a minimum indoor temperature of 18°C. Higher temperatures may be advised for at-risk populations, including older people and those with chronic illnesses.

3.5. Communities and place

Deprivation

Torry is characterised by high levels of deprivation, with particularly acute challenges in Torry East, as discussed in the section on income inequality. According to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 2020, two data zones in Torry East fall within the 10% most deprived data zones in Scotland, a group that includes 698 data zones nationally (see Figure 10) [25].

In total, eight data zones in Torry (five out of six in Torry East and three out of seven in Torry West) fall within the 20% most deprived in Scotland [24]. As noted, income deprivation is also pronounced: on average, 16% of the population in Torry West and 22% in Torry East are income deprived [25]. Recent census data reinforce this picture, indicating that 60.83% of households in Torry are deprived in at least one of the four dimensions measured (i.e., employment, education, health and disability, and housing) (see Figure 11) [6].

Furthermore, the claimant count in Torry East (8.4%) and Torry West (7.4%) is more than twice the Aberdeen City average (3.2% in March 2024) [26], signalling a substantially higher concentration of residents who are out of work and reliant on unemployment-related benefits.

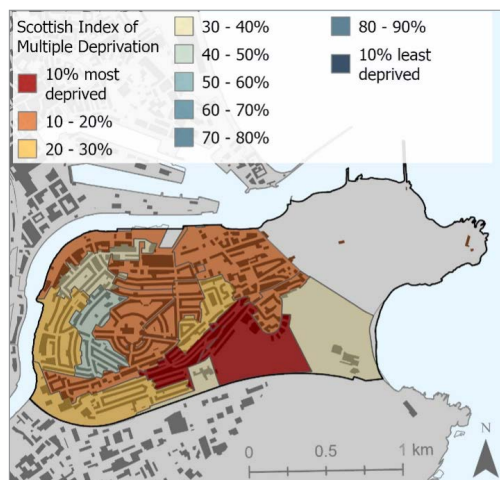


Figure 10: Deprivation in Torry according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (Own elaboration based on SIMD 2020 data) [6]

Food poverty

The cost-of-living crisis has not only pushed many households into fuel poverty but also into food poverty, as the two are inherently linked, leaving the most deprived residents facing the choice between heating or eating. Food banks and community pantries have a visible presence in and around Torry, within walking distance of the neighbourhood, for example the Community Food Initiatives North East (CFINE) foodbank (AB11 5RW) and the Abdn South Foodbank operated by TLC (AB11 9QH), which indicates the extent to which basic needs are under strain in the area.

Education and qualifications

The percentage of people in Torry with no qualifications is 17.47%, which is higher than that for Scotland (16.65%). The remaining 65.45% is divided into lower school qualifications (22.46%), upper school qualifications (6.93%), apprenticeship qualifications (5.89%), further education and sub-degree Higher Education qualifications (11.14%), and degree level qualifications or above (19.12%) [6].

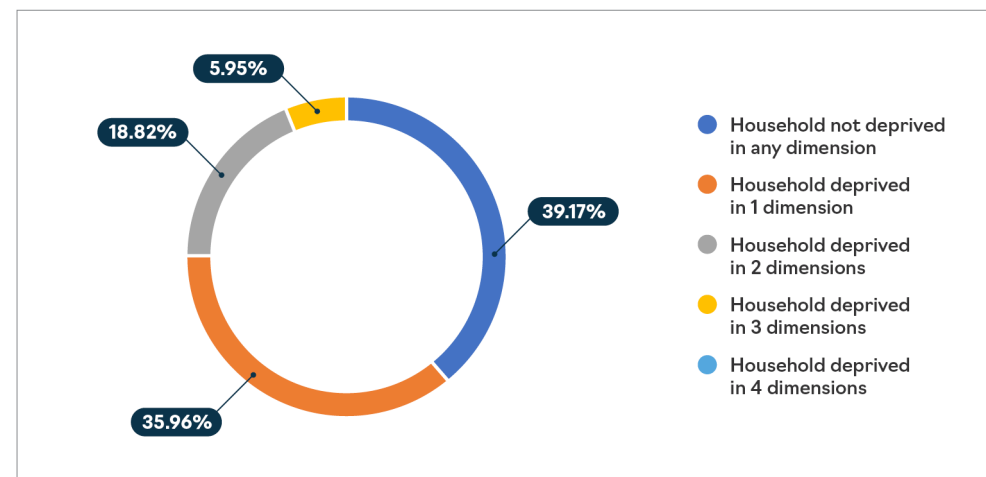


Figure 11: Households deprived in multiple dimensions in Torry (Own elaboration based on 2022 Scotland's Census data) [6]

Health and life expectancy

Based on self-assessed health, 38.08% of people in Torry report feeling very good, 37.30% good, 17.23% fair, 5.94% bad, and 1.45% very bad. In addition, 25.31% of Torry's population reports having some type of disability (10.98% are limited a lot, while 14.33% are limited a little) [6].

The relationship between life expectancy and deprivation is well acknowledged. Torry, which records higher levels of deprivation, also scores lower in life expectancy for both females and males when compared with the averages for Aberdeen and Scotland. Estimated life expectancy at birth varies substantially across Aberdeen's Intermediate Zones, and the most recent small-area estimates are for 2019-2023 (5-year average) [27]. Life expectancy for females and males in Torry East (2019-2023) is 76.0 and 71.5 years, while in the same period in Torry West it is 78.6 and 72.4 years, respectively [27]. Scottish life expectancy at birth (2021-2023) was 80.8 years for females and 76.8 years for males [28].

Recently, concerns have been raised about the potential consequences for Torry residents' health and wellbeing of the construction of the Ness Energy from Waste (EfW) facility in proximity to the community [29,7], and the possible partial loss of St Fittick's Park - the primary green space for the neighbourhood - to make way for the Energy Transition Zone [3,7]. The dilemmas posed by these expected negative social and environmental externalities, at the local level, further emphasise why planning and economic decisions in the context of the energy transition should adopt a critical systems approach.



Figure 12: View from St Fittick's Park towards the Aberdeen South Harbour expansion, illustrating the close proximity of major port infrastructure and ongoing industrial development to Torry. (Photograph by Leonardo Ricaurte)

4. Policy Snapshot

The policy landscape governing Aberdeen's transition to Net Zero is multisectoral and multilayered, spanning UK-wide, Scottish, regional, and local policies. The UK Government's governance of oil and gas, for example, has a direct impact on employment, housing prices, and other socio-economic indicators in the city. The approaches to decarbonisation and economic transformation have unintended local consequences, including in places like Torry, requiring careful consideration of alignment, coordination, and social justice.

While the energy sector as a whole is a reserved matter, the Scottish Government has authority over renewable energy developments, as well as planning and consent issues. The importance of a Just Transition is emphasised both in Scottish climate legislation and in its draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan [30]. Furthermore, the National Planning Framework 4 embeds climate resilience and community wellbeing into spatial planning [31]. Despite this, decisions on major infrastructure projects are often made centrally with limited local engagement. In addition, community benefits, particularly around renewables, are currently largely governed by voluntary guidelines and are applied inconsistently.

At the local level, the Net Zero Aberdeen Routemap: Towards becoming a net zero emissions city by 2045 sets out a pathway towards Aberdeen becoming Net Zero by 2045 [32]. Adopted in 2022, it is accompanied by six enabling sectoral strategies, with Just Transition featured across all sectors. The Buildings and Heat Strategy was adopted in 2022 as part of this process, with plans to develop Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategies (LHEES) for each local area in the city [33,19].

Following the planning reform, the Council is also actively engaged in community planning through a range of processes including Local Place Plans, Local Outcome Improvement Plans and Locality Plans. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 requires the Council to identify priority areas, where people experience significantly poorer outcomes than other people across the city and Scotland as a result of socio-economic disadvantage [34].

Torry has been identified as such priority neighbourhood, featuring in a number of initiatives of the South Locality Plan 2021-2026 [35]. Discussions around



Figure 13: View of Torry from Footdee (Fittie), illustrating the area's transition from a traditional fishing settlement to a centre of maritime and fish-processing activity. The industrial infrastructure visible today occupies part of the area that formerly comprised the Old Torry fishing village. (Photograph by Leonardo Ricaurte)

community wealth building have, therefore, increasingly featured in the Council's planning and will continue to steer decision-making following the Bill's passage by the Scottish Parliament in February 2026 (Royal Assent pending) [36].

There are many local grassroots initiatives aimed at community planning, wealth building, and retrofit. These include the Torry Community Council, Connected Torry digital platform, the Torry Development Trust, and Friends of St. Fittick's Park. The North East Scotland retroFIT Hub (NESFIT Hub), a community-led retrofit cooperative, supports the Torry Retrofit project, working to develop community action and demonstration projects for retrofit in the area.

The Aberdeen case study offers a critical opportunity to address systemic challenges affecting the area through the lens of buildings, heat, retrofit, and community agency. We will work with partners including NESFIT, NESCAN and Transition Catalyst, local technical experts, community groups, and residents to articulate, plan and implement community-led, co-created strategies using a systems approach.



5. System Challenges for a Just Transition to Net Zero

A critical systems approach to the energy transition in Torry holds promise for addressing systemic challenges that have multifaceted and compounded effects within the community, as well as at the city, regional and national levels. By identifying how the different systems at play interact with each other, mapping the most affected groups, and working with them to identify their challenges, aspirations and needs – recognising their intersectionality and interdependence – critical systems thinking provides a framework within which deliberation precedes decision-making, accountability is shared and open, and benefits and burdens are more fairly distributed.

Torry has experienced a range of interrelated systemic challenges ranging from inequality, poverty, unemployment and poor housing to disparities in terms of health and well-being, and persistent limitations on participation in decision-making. Having missed out on many of the benefits of Aberdeen's oil boom and its concomitant economic prosperity, Torry has nonetheless remained a highly industrialised yet marginalised locale, housing a socially, ethnically and economically diverse mix of communities, many from Eastern Europe and more recently from other regions since Brexit. To a significant extent, the local community has provided a considerable contingent of the entry-level workforce, while the area has also been subjected to several adverse impositions that have supported the local economy but degraded Torry's local environment. Examples include the demolition of "Old Torry", the original fishing village, to make way for the oil industry's marine base in the 1970s, and the end of the shipbuilding industry, marked by the closure of the Hall Russell shipyard in 1992 [37]. More recently, the ongoing development of the Energy Transition Zone threatens a significant component of local green infrastructure, notably St Fittick's Park [38] while promising an improved local economy.

When it comes to the just transition to Net Zero, it is imperative that local stakeholders, particularly those who are and will be directly affected by it, are at the centre of the discussion. In Torry, a neighbourhood that has already been in the midst of transitions that were not necessarily just, residents have started to organise to challenge ongoing development plans that are perceived as arbitrary and inequitable – a relevant example is the creation of Torry's People Assembly to champion people centred outcomes.

More recently, the Torry Community Retrofit project has emerged from the community's claim for local initiatives that address fuel poverty while restoring local economies and participation. For the community, housing retrofit and fuel poverty stand out as important concerns, along with a collective interest in recognising and celebrating Torry's cultural heritage and its crucial role in shaping Aberdeen's history and development [21].

The JUST-systems project aims to assist in the planning and early implementation of strategies that address these challenges using a systems approach. In practical terms, community-led initiatives will leverage purposeful demonstrators as anchors for awareness raising, capacity building and community organisation. Following a staged approach, and collaborating with community-based organisations such as NESFIT, Transition Catalyst, NESCAN, Torry Development Trust, the Torry Men's Shed and Aberdeen City Council, the overarching objective is to foster a Net Zero transition that meaningfully recognises and addresses the needs of the community while aligning with wider local and national milestones.

A fair transition in Torry using a critical systems framework requires identifying the different, sometimes clashing, stakeholders' priorities, and creating space for deliberation and negotiation. In this process, different stocks of the system, e.g. power infrastructure, jobs, housing and the built environment, heritage assets, finance, and green space, are examined, and the relevant boundaries for the system are agreed. A system approach is helpful for understanding grassroots initiatives such as Torry People's Assembly or Torry Community Retrofit project not just as context and time-bound actions, but as opportunities to problematise the interrelationship of sectors, technologies, behaviours and spaces of participation and governance models. In this way, a just transition represents an opportunity for communities like Torry to articulate their aspirations and needs to attain transformative change, where their role and, crucially, the benefits of evolving socio-economic arrangements are more fairly distributed, while addressing historic injustices.



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