Economic Development

Shetland: Islands of Opportunity

Shetland Islands Council

Background

Shetland has a long history of inward investment, particularly through oil and gas, alongside strengths in seafood, aquaculture, fishing, energy, ports and emerging sectors such as space. Current and future investment interest offers opportunities for infrastructure, jobs and economic growth, but also brings challenges around connectivity, workforce availability, accommodation and community confidence.

Shetland Islands Council has developed a place- and partnership-based approach to support inward investment by promoting Shetland's strengths while setting clear expectations for fair, collaborative development. This approach is built around strong place branding, local coordination and a "One Shetland" voice that connects investment with long-term community wellbeing.

Key activities

1. Developing a place brand

Shetland Islands Council developed Promote Shetland as a dedicated and locally accountable place marketing approach. It was created to establish and maintain a strong place brand and to raise Shetland's profile as a destination. Its purpose is to build a positive reputation based on quality, distinctiveness, authenticity and integrity, while supporting activity linked to living, working, studying, visiting and investing in Shetland.

Promote Shetland provides more than a marketing function. It acts as a shared resource for the whole of Shetland, supporting communities, partners and sectors to use a consistent identity when promoting the islands externally. This is particularly important where decisions affecting Shetland are often made elsewhere, policy environments are complex, and projects can take many years to develop.

2. Creating an online gateway

Promote Shetland operates through shetland.org, which provides tailored information for different audiences. The website includes material for visitors, people considering living or working in Shetland, students and potential investors. It contains practical information, sector stories, local amenities, housing information, visitor resources and content that supports Shetland's wider economic and community aims.

This online gateway allows Shetland to present connected messages across different strands of place promotion. While the needs of a visitor, student, worker or investor may differ, the shared platform helps ensure that each audience can access information rooted in the same overall place identity.

3. Promoting investment opportunities

Shetland uses its investment messaging to highlight a strong entrepreneurial culture, a skilled workforce, a robust supply chain and a diverse economy. Investment material promotes opportunities across established and emerging sectors, including aquaculture, fisheries, renewable energy, decommissioning, ports, space, hydrogen, ammonia and other clean fuels.

Positive sector examples help show the scale and variety of Shetland's economy. These include mussel farming, the developing space sector, Lerwick's role as a key fishing and multi-use port, and the wider engineering and industrial supply chain that supports energy, aquaculture and other sectors. This presents Shetland as both an established investment location and a place where new opportunities are emerging.

4. Coordinating local engagement

EmPowering Shetland was developed as a collaborative, place-based forum for engaging with inward investors and external developers. It brings together local partners to support a coordinated approach to investment and development. The forum gives investors an early route into local engagement, helping them understand priorities, opportunities and concerns from the outset.

This helps avoid fragmented conversations where different agencies are approached separately and may provide different messages. Instead, EmPowering Shetland supports a clearer and more constructive "One Shetland" position. It also creates a space where communities can be reassured that development is being approached responsibly and that potential impacts are being discussed openly.

5. Setting local expectations

Shetland has developed the Shetland Development Charter to clarify expectations for investment and development. The charter builds on the Shetland Development Principles and the Fair Share for Shetland work, particularly around energy development and the need for Shetland to secure fair value from production, distribution and use.

Its priority areas include a just transition, environmental protection, community benefit, local supply chain integration, community wealth building, housing, ownership, fair share, and fiscal and regulatory changes. The charter does not replace planning, consenting or regulatory processes. Instead, it supports early engagement and shared understanding. Investors signing up to the charter are expected to develop a delivery plan showing how the charter's principles will be upheld within their project.

Benefits and impact

Clearer route for investors

Shetland's approach gives investors a clearer way to understand both the opportunities available and the expectations attached to development. Rather than navigating a complex landscape of separate organisations, investors can engage through a coordinated route that reflects shared local priorities. This is particularly valuable where developments are large scale, long term and linked to multiple sectors, agencies or regulatory considerations.

The approach also supports a balanced investment message. Shetland is presented as a place with existing infrastructure, significant industrial activity, a skilled workforce and a sophisticated supply chain. At the same time, the messaging is clear that investment should be fair, collaborative and connected to local benefit.

Stronger local voice

The “One Shetland” approach strengthens the islands’ ability to speak with a clear and constructive voice. This matters because many investment, infrastructure and policy decisions are made outside Shetland. A strong place brand and shared local position help Shetland explain its priorities, strengths and expectations to investors, stakeholders and external decision-makers.

It also supports local confidence. By setting out expectations early, Shetland can show communities that development is being considered in relation to local needs, not only external investment ambitions. This does not remove the need for formal planning or regulatory processes, but it creates an additional space for early dialogue.

Better alignment with community benefit

Shetland’s approach connects inward investment to community wealth, supply chain development and long-term wellbeing. The Development Charter and related work focus on securing a fair share of value, maximising community benefit, supporting local supply chains and ensuring that Shetland continues to have a skilled workforce and strong economic foundations.

Housing is recognised as a particularly important issue. Investment can bring jobs, infrastructure and capital, but it can also increase demand for accommodation and local services. By raising these issues early, Shetland can encourage developers to consider their wider contribution to the islands, including how projects interact with local capacity and community needs.

More purposeful promotion

Promote Shetland has helped provide a flexible and integrated platform for place promotion. Its value lies in supporting several audiences while maintaining a consistent identity. Tourism, population attraction, education, employment and investment are not treated as disconnected activities. Instead, they are linked through a shared understanding of Shetland as a distinctive place with strong assets and clear ambitions.

Learning and reflections

Local identity has strategic value

A key learning from Shetland’s approach is that place identity can play an important strategic role in economic development. Promote Shetland is not simply about external promotion. It provides a shared way of describing Shetland’s strengths, opportunities and character across different audiences, helping messages about living, working, studying, visiting and investing feel connected rather than separate.

For inward investment, this means promotion is grounded in the realities of the place. Shetland can highlight its established industries, skilled workforce, supply chains and emerging opportunities while maintaining a brand based on authenticity and integrity. The learning is that a strong place brand can bring coherence to a wide range of economic and community ambitions.

Coordination requires structure

Shetland's experience shows that collaboration benefits from practical mechanisms. There are many local partners with an interest in development and many external organisations seeking to understand opportunities in Shetland. Without coordination, engagement can become fragmented and messages can become inconsistent.

EmPowering Shetland provides a structure for partners to work together around shared priorities. It helps Shetland present itself collectively and supports early conversations with investors. The learning is that a "One Shetland" approach requires more than goodwill. It needs clear routes for engagement, shared expectations and arrangements that can be maintained over time.

Investment brings wider pressures

Inward investment cannot be viewed only through the lens of economic growth. New development can bring jobs, infrastructure and capital investment, but it can also create pressures around housing, connectivity, services and workforce availability. These issues are particularly important in an island context, where capacity and logistics can be more constrained.

Shetland's approach recognises that development must be considered in relation to long-term community wellbeing. The learning is that the benefits of investment are more likely to be realised when practical pressures are identified early and discussed alongside opportunities.

Distinctive places need tailored approaches

Shetland's geography, economy and energy context mean that inward investment and energy transition will not look the same as in other places. The islands have substantial strengths, including energy expertise, seafood industries, ports, industrial infrastructure and emerging sectors. They also face distinct costs, capacity issues and logistical challenges.

This highlights the importance of place-based approaches that reflect local circumstances. Shetland's experience suggests that inward investment work is strongest when external promotion is matched with a clear understanding of local realities. This allows the islands to make a positive case for investment while also explaining the conditions needed for development to contribute meaningfully to community wealth and long-term wellbeing.

Contact for enquiries

Thomas Coutts
thomas.coutts@shetland.gov.uk