

“A historic moment”: first meeting for rail campaigners with nuclear industry

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A veteran campaigner described a recent meeting (Monday 24 April) between senior representatives from Nuclear Transport Solutions (NTS) and campaign groups concerned about nuclear rail safety as “a historic moment”.

After many years of waiting, Martyn Lowe from the Close Capenhurst campaign group was pleased to finally be able to put his questions directly to senior nuclear rail managers at this first face-to-face meeting held at the Gresty Bridge Rail Depot, on the outskirts of Crewe. This was also the first time Martyn had seen the inside of the facility as previously his experience has been confined to the gates where he has stood, with a small band of fellow activists, handing out leaflets to rail enthusiasts attending open days at the depot, warning them of the hazards of transporting nuclear fuel and nuclear waste on Britain’s railways.

The depot has been used since 2007 by Direct Rail Services, part of Nuclear Transport Solutions (NTS), to

maintain its locomotive stock used to power nuclear trains. Typically, a nuclear waste train can carry between one and thirteen flasks designed specifically for the purpose. NTS is a division of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority. The authority is charged with managing Britain's nuclear waste and decommissioning redundant nuclear power plants, and Direct Rail Services with responsibility for carrying nuclear fuel to operational nuclear plants from manufacturing and enrichment facilities at Capenhurst and Springfield, and nuclear waste from operational and redundant nuclear power plants to Sellafield and the Low-Level Waste Repository at Drigg, both in Cumbria. More recently, NTS has branched out into the delivery of foodstuffs and other goods for supermarket chain TESCO.

Accompanying Martyn to the meeting was Tor Justad, Chair of Highlands against Nuclear Power (HANP), and Richard Outram, Secretary of the UK/Ireland Nuclear Free Local Authorities (NFLA). Tor travelled down specially from Inverness to join the group. HANP has recently been renamed from Highlands against Nuclear Transport reflecting its wider remit in opposing new and existing nuclear power projects in the North of Scotland and its long history of activism against nuclear rail transport to and from Dounreay.

In the summer of last year, Close Capenhurst, HANP, NFLA, and Radiation Free Lakeland sent a comprehensive question set to NTS executives seeking answers to a range of concerns about safety on the rail network and making several positive suggestions to improve it. After receiving a written response, Richard has been liaising with Nuclear Transport Solutions for many months to make the meeting happen, and the trio was delighted to be able to accept NTS's invitation to join them yesterday at the depot.

In a frank and far-ranging discussion, the campaigners raised concerns around the testing regime applicable to the flasks used to transport nuclear waste; the routes taken by nuclear trains; the condition of the railways used by NTS rolling stock; emergency preparedness, including liaison arrangements and exercises with the emergency services and local Councils; the amount and nature of the information disclosed to the public by NTS; stakeholder consultation, particularly of rail user groups; and the use of the Georgemas Junction and NTS trains to transport a greater range of food provisions and construction materials in the far North of Scotland.

After a productive meeting, the party toured the facility to see the engineering work in progress and visited two of the locomotives. They were able to climb into the driver's cab of one of the locomotives and see the safety features within and hear about NTS's launch of the Class 68 locomotive at the COP26 Climate Change Conference in Glasgow last year. The Class 68 has been successfully powered by hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO), a new fuel that reduces emissions, in a unique trial and retains the ability to be dual-fuelled.

NTS staff have been asked to take away several positive suggestions made by the campaigners, and it is hoped that this will be the first of a series of regular meetings where the issues can be revisited.

Speaking of the visit, Tor Justad from HANP said: "This meeting was positive and all the relevant senior NTS staff present were engaged in responding to the concerns raised.

"It was acknowledged that responding to an accident on the Far North Line (Thurso-Inverness), the line used for transporting highly radioactive materials from Georgemas Junction to Barrow-in-Furness, would present multiple challenges.

“So the opportunity to discuss this and other issues is a good example of good practice in engagement and is welcomed by HANP.”

Whilst Martyn Lowe from Close Capenhurst added: “After decades of campaigning upon the waste trains issue, this is the first time we have managed to have a meeting with the management of DRS, and to express our various concerns to them.

It is to be hoped that we can continue a dialogue with them, and especially focus upon some of rail tracks which have been identified as being in a very worrying condition.”

An NTS spokesperson said: “Engaging with our stakeholders is an important aspect of our work and our meeting with NFLA was productive.

“We’re proud of our 100% nuclear safety record and we were pleased to have the opportunity to discuss and demonstrate our commitment to safe and secure transport operations.”