

Minister looks forward to ‘bright industrial future’ for site set to home new global rail centre

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The Global Centre of Rail Excellence (GCRE) has acquired the former Nant Helen opencast site and Onllwyn Washery in South Wales from opencast mining company Celtic Energy.

The announcement, made by Economy Minister Vaughan Gething, signals the start of an exciting phase for the 700-hectare site at the head of the Dulais Valley in south Wales, allowing contractors to prepare for construction of UK's first Net Zero Railway

Work will now start to transform it into the UK's 'one stop shop' for railway innovation, from research and development, through testing, verification and certification, to applied innovation on mainline passenger and freight railways.

Visiting the site of the £250 million infrastructure project, Vaughan Gething, said: "The Global Centre of Rail Excellence being constructed here in Wales is one of the most critical and creative infrastructure projects happening anywhere in Europe.

“Its significance to the local community and the Welsh economy should not be underestimated. This is a vital regeneration project which will create much-needed jobs and skills. I’m confident it will support a bright industrial future for the Dulais Valley and the surrounding area.”

The project is split in to three core phases:

- Phase 1 - The provision of sidings for rolling stock from the summer of 2023
- Phase 2 - The building of two electrified test loops, one high speed test loop 6.9 kilometre long and a four kilometre Infrastructure test loop, together with supporting infrastructure and buildings from 2024
- Phase 3: The addition of expanded stabling, maintenance, and commissioning facilities along with research facilities, hotel, and business park in 2025 and ongoing.

A range of consultants and contractors including Hirwaun-based Walters Group, Atkins, Fifth Studio, Arcadis and Mott MacDonald are now working in an alliance to design the site and begin preparation for construction in early 2023, following outline planning consent for GCRE being granted by Neath Port Talbot Council and Powys County Council in 2021,

Simon Jones, chief executive of GCRE said: “We are moving at pace to deliver on our ambitious plans to deliver a modern and comprehensive rail testing and innovation facility, building our team and preparing for construction with the aim of having our commercial rolling stock storage facility available to the market within the next 12 months.

“The next stage of our procurement process will begin shortly with both a meet the buyer event and the launch of a separate innovation competition next week to give potential suppliers and partners the opportunity to find out more about how they can get involved.

“This will be followed by the launch of an exciting investment prospectus to attract private funding for the project. With the support of the Welsh and UK Governments and Powys and Neath Port Talbot local authorities, we really are on a mission to put Wales and the UK at the very heart of 21st century sustainable transport innovation.”

Deputy Minister for Climate Change, Lee Waters, said: “GCRE will be a unique facility offering world class testing of infrastructure, rolling stock and new technologies that will fill a much-needed gap in the rail industry. Crucially, it will help manage the cost of rail projects by testing ideas earlier before their deployment on projects and support the vital innovation we need to get to Net Zero.”

“The formal acquisition of the land now paves the way for the start of construction by allowing GCRE and their contractors to take control of the site and begin to establish the infrastructure required to turn this ambitious and exciting vision into reality.”