



NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNCIL

Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Committee 25th February 2022

Report of the Head of Planning and Public Protection Ceri Morris

Matter for Information

Wards Affected: Onllwyn / Seven Sisters

Global Centre of Rail Excellence – Progress Update

Purpose of the Report

To provide a progress update on bringing forward the development of the Global Centre of Rail Excellence (GCRE) as requested by Members of the Scrutiny Committee as part of their Forward Work Programme.

Executive Summary

Planning Committee conditionally approved a planning application ('outline' with all matters reserved) for the construction of a world-class rail testing facility at the head of the Dulais and Tawe Valleys on 27th July 2021.

The train, rail infrastructure and technology testing facility known as the 'Global Centre of Rail Excellence' (GCRE), will provide a unique capability in the UK and Europe to support innovation in the UK and international rail industry, including the testing of cutting-edge, green technologies.

The project represents a capital investment of circa £157m with the possibility of some 150-200 jobs created.

This report provides an update in respect of the progress made to date and an outline of the activities and key milestones that are planned over the next 12 months.

Background

The Welsh Government has been working in partnership with Neath Port Talbot and Powys Councils to develop proposals for the GCRE, which will be located on the site of the Nant Helen open cast mine operated by Celtic Energy and the Onllwyn Washery Distribution Centre.

The GCRE will cover an area of around 475 hectares and will consist of two looped test tracks, one being an electrified high speed rolling stock track (6.9km long) and the other being a low speed infrastructure test track (4.5km long).

There will also be a dual platform test environment, operations and control offices, staff accommodation, shunter cabins and facilities for research and development, education and training.

The GCRE therefore offers an opportunity for significant rail investment in Wales. This would benefit Neath Port Talbot and Powys and complement the Transport for Wales focus and commitment to revitalising the rail network by providing new services and rolling stock (trains and carriages), innovative solutions and a significant programme of station investment.

The development will also be integral in supporting recovery post Covid – the UK Government having emphasised the importance of infrastructure spending to help kick-start the economy and ensure long-term economic recovery. It will also provide further opportunities for sustainable technologies associated with the rail sector (e.g. electric, battery, links to sustainable generation etc.).

GCRE – Overview

The proposed GCRE aims to meet several objectives, which would address the issues and needs of the UK rail industry, which in summary are to:

- Deliver a UK-based modern and comprehensive rail testing facility to provide the capacity and capabilities for rigorous testing of rolling stock, infrastructure and integrated systems from prototype to implementation.
- Act as a catalyst for the creation of a rail technology hub in Wales, providing a flexible, open-market platform for leading R&D activity that drives innovation.
- Provide opportunities to work with industry to support skills development through high-quality employment in fair, secure and sustainable jobs that contribute to reducing regional inequality and promoting regeneration in Wales.

- Develop and test rail sector principles, standards and specifications which improve the UK's competitive strengths as a world leader in achieving carbon neutrality, contributing to an overall decrease in carbon emissions across the rail industry.

Phasing of Development

The works to create the GCRE are expected to be undertaken in the following broad three phases (although delivery may not necessarily be in this order):

1. The opening of the 4.5km test track, largely for testing infrastructure and some stabling facilities in 2023;
2. The addition of the 6.9km test track primarily for testing rolling stock in 2024; and
3. The addition of expanded stabling facilities and research facilities in 2025.

Phase 1a – Purpose and Scope

In respect of the current position, a ‘Project Delivery Group’ is now well established and meets on a fortnightly basis.

Planning Officers, along with those from the various in-house specialist teams, are continuing to discuss matters with the Consultants who have been appointed to progress the detailed work – the current focus of which is to discharge a number of planning conditions facilitating the following:

- In order to ensure that the GCRE project remains commercially viable during the construction phase it is crucial that the storage sidings are built before the end of 2022. The storage sidings will be initially required for the passive storage of up to 250 Train Cars for varying periods. This storage function will provide vital revenue for the project and enable its overheads to be covered over the first 2 years or so before the GCRE comes into service fully.
- In order to facilitate the storage sidings there will need to be a limited amount of demolition of existing structures (existing Washery buildings) and removal of the existing track bed within Phase 1a.
- Approximately 100,000m³ of earthworks will be required to create a suitable profile for the sidings and ensure efficient drainage. This will result in a surplus of c.50,000m³ of fill materials which will be temporarily stored within the phase until it can be redistributed at a later date to another phase of the operations.

- As well as the earthworks element of the scheme a SABs drainage application will be submitted demonstrating the sustainable drainage of the new sidings area.
- Ecological mitigation will take place prior to works in any affected areas.
- Detailed design of the sidings tracks and associated infrastructure will take place between April and July 2022 before tracks can be laid later in the year.

Work Programme – Overview

The following provides an overall summary of the key elements of work undertaken to date and outlines the work programme moving forward:

- Consultants appointed to aid in discharge of early planning conditions – Sept'21 (*ongoing*).
- Earthworks Tender produced and advertised (Oct'21).
- Masterplan Tender produced and advertised (Nov'21).
- Business Plan written and finalised (Dec'21).
- Business Plan sent to Welsh Government and BEIS for evaluation and Final Investment Decision (Dec'21-March'22).
- Energy Strategy Tender Produced and Advertised (Dec'21).
- Outline Rail Systems Design Tender produced and advertised (Dec'21).
- Earthworks Tender closed and evaluated (Dec'21-Jan'22).
- Masterplan Tender closed and evaluation under way (Jan-Feb'22).
- Evaluation of Energy Strategy Tender (Feb'22).
- Evaluation of Outline Rail Design Tender (Feb'22).
- First reserved matters / planning condition submissions (Feb-March'22).
- Earthworks Commencement (Late Summer 2022).
- First Tranche of Sidings into use (Autumn 2022).
- Agree Anchor Tenancy and land / property issues with Network Rail (end of 2022).
- Higher Education led bid for separately funded Centre of Excellence in Testing and Validation (CoETV) at GCRE site to be formalised and progressed within next 6 months.

Financial Impacts

No implications.

Integrated Impact Assessment

There is no requirement to undertake an Integrated Impact Assessment as this report is for information purposes.

Valleys Communities Impacts

The GCRE development will bring significant investment in jobs and technology, for not only our valley areas but also the County Borough and the South West Wales region as a whole.

Workforce Impacts

No implications.

Legal Impacts

No implications.

Risk Management Impacts

No implications.

Consultation

There is no requirement for external consultation on this item.

For Noting

Members to note the progress made to date in bringing forward the development of the GCRE.

Appendices

None.

List of Background Papers

None.

Officer Contact

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