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Global rail test and innovation hub on track for arrival in 2024 as work starts on new Global Centre of Rail Excellence

A design alliance partnership has been appointed to begin detailed design and master planning for the Global Centre of Rail Excellence (GCRE) following a competitive tender process led by the Design Commission for Wales who are advising on the development of the £200 million project.

The major infrastructure project will transform the site of the former Nant Helen Opencast Mine and Onllwyn Washery at the head of the Dulais and Tawe Valleys in South Wales into a global hub for rolling stock and infrastructure testing, innovation, storage and maintenance. It will be used by the UK and international rail industry and is expected to create over 100 jobs directly and be a catalyst for creating many more as academic and industrial partners are attracted to the site.

GCRE was established by the Welsh Government as a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) in 2021 with an initial commitment of £50 million. The UK Government is expected to confirm a further £10 million for research and development along with capital funding of £20 million. An investment prospectus to attract private funding for the project is also in development ready for launch in the autumn of 2022.

Outline planning consent for the project was granted by Neath Port Talbot Council and Powys County Council in 2021. Various tier one contractors have now been appointed including Hirwaun-based Walters Group who will work with Atkins to prepare the site for construction. Arcadis are developing the rail systems design and Mott MacDonald is focused on the net zero energy strategy. A multidisciplinary team has also been appointed to produce an overarching masterplan for the transformation of the 475-hectare site. This follows a competitive tender process led by the Design Commission for Wales who are advising on the development of GCRE.

5th Studio, Expedition Engineering, Jonathan Cook Landscape Architects, Faithful & Gould, Fairhurst, PRD, Wildwood Ecology and Thirty 4/7 will develop a holistic spatial plan that will incorporate the track testing facility including proposals for the future landscape of the whole site, together with an innovation campus incorporating visitor accommodation. This integrated design process will include public consultation to engage and integrate the views of local residents.

Debra Williams is Chair of GCRE. She said: "This is an ambitious infrastructure project that has the potential to transform the local area with a £200 million investment that will put Wales and the UK at the very heart of 21st century sustainable transport innovation. Featuring the UK's first net zero railway, GCRE will include a modern and comprehensive rail testing and innovation facility with capacity and capabilities for rigorous testing of rolling stock, infrastructure, and integrated systems from prototype to implementation."

Simon Jones, Chief Executive of GCRE, said: "GCRE will be unique in Europe and is a major economic development project for Wales. It will support the railway industry to meet the challenges of reducing costs through innovation, improving reliability and passenger experience, and helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. With the support of our key stakeholders including Neath Port Talbot and Powys County Councils, GCRE will play a pivotal role for the public and private sector partners of the railway in the UK and overseas.

"Nant Helen was one of the last opencast coal mines in Wales. The development of GCRE will establish a progressive, post-carbon future for the site; providing much needed state-of-the-art rolling stock testing, infrastructure testing, storage and maintenance facilities for the international rail industry and creating jobs for local people."

James Price, Chief Executive of Transport for Wales said: "Wales and the UK is seeing major investment in key infrastructure projects but there is no fit-for-purpose dynamic testing and certification facility in the UK. GCRE will become 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 and accelerates

innovation on our journey to net zero. It's an exciting step-forward that complements the work that we are doing to make transport in Wales truly sustainable and fit for future generations. Transport for Wales is supporting project delivery and will be among the 'anchor tenants' making valuable use of the GCRE facility for decades to come."

Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive of the Design Commission for Wales, said: "Transforming environments and creating new opportunities takes ambition, critical creative thinking, and clear strategy from inception to delivery. We're pleased to support the GCRE team who have demonstrated that ambition and made clear with the appointment of the design alliance, that they have no intention of starting with compromise. The design-led team bring an approach and level of experience which aligns perfectly with the scale of this opportunity."

Walters Director, Kevin Llewellyn said: "We are delighted to have secured this project, the site for which is just 10 miles from our head office in Hirwaun. As a local employer we are grateful for the recognition and support of GCRE Limited in awarding us this contract. Our unrivalled experience with design partner, Atkins, will see this exciting project set the stage for what will undoubtedly be a world class facility."