



Hutchinson targets new opportunities in nuclear

Steelwork specialist Hutchinson Engineering is working to expand into new markets after being granted Fit For Nuclear.

Widnes-based Hutchinson designs, manufactures and installs complex quality-assured steel structures. Founded in 1979 to serve the local oil and gas refineries, the company grew and expanded into other markets including telecoms, where it now produces most of the UK's mobile streetworks structures.

Around 12 years ago, the firm moved into the renewable energy sector as a manufacturer of onshore wind turbine towers. It now supplies secondary structures such as internal platforms and ladders for larger offshore turbines.

At an offshore wind industry event in late 2019, Hutchinson business development manager Neal Scrivener met the Nuclear AMRC's Phil Monks. The two discussed where Hutchinson's capabilities could fit into the nuclear new build and decommissioning markets, and how the company could make sure it was ready to make the move into nuclear.

"Nuclear had always been something we aspired to, but it always seemed to be a bit beyond most manufacturers," Scrivener notes.

Monks arranged a visit by Fit For Nuclear industrial advisor John Olver in March 2020, just before the first Covid lockdown.

"That slowed the process down somewhat," Scrivener recalls. *"We had an initial walk around the business, and a meeting in June where we started to understand the requirements."*

Olver's on-site assessment rated the business higher than the company's initial online assessment, which Scrivener completed with Hutchinson's operations director Steve Adams. *"You know yourself as a business, but you don't know where you sit in comparison with other people,"* Adams says. *"John does know that, and sees what other companies can offer."*

Thanks to Hutchinson's experience in other quality-critical sectors, the F4N assessment didn't identify any major gaps in performance, but did highlight some areas where current processes could be improved.

"The accreditations we have which enable us to work in offshore, for example, are the same requirements that nuclear has – all the formal audits and capability assessments, we have those," Adams says. *"John was more looking at the softer side of things, how we managed our own internal systems and processes, where there were some areas where we needed to be more formalised."*



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One area for improvement was around how essential documents were shared and presented across the business. *“It’s always a challenge to make sure the health and safety documentation, for example, passes through all the different layers and is available on the shopfloor,”* Adams notes.

As well as updating some systems, the team made sure that risk assessments, procedural documents and other essential information were easily available through the company intranet to all 140 staff working across three sites around Widnes. *“You can sustain a process by having a more formalised system,”* Adams notes. *“Everything existed, but there’s a risk that it loses focus over time unless you have a system that’s well managed. What we’ve done is put in place those processes with a bit more rigour.”*

Olver’s on-site assessment also identified improvements in how parts of the workshop were managed. *“We were relatively good at that, but the areas John found were shared spaces that weren’t clearly defined as someone’s responsibility,”* Adams says. *“We’ve come up with systems and processes to improve that, and it makes for a substantially better working environment, which is an improvement for everyone.”*

Hutchinson was granted Fit For Nuclear status in January 2021, less than a year after the first assessment visit.

“Hutchinson have been a great company to work with during their journey to achieve F4N,” says Olver. *“Despite the*

pressures from Covid on key management time, they fully embraced the concepts and displayed a strong keenness to implement changes.”

The Hutchinson team are now exploring opportunities across the nuclear sector, and building connections with potential customers.

“We need to look at how we align ourselves and where we fit within the tiering of nuclear,” Scrivener says. *“We tried to break into rail a few years ago, and it’s taken us a long while and we are only now starting to see tenders. I think it’ll take some time to work our way through in nuclear, but it’ll be across new build and decommissioning.”*

The team are particularly interested in opportunities in new designs of modular reactor, where the projected demand for relatively high numbers of factory-built modules will play to the company’s strengths.

The team are also exploring opportunities in the waste management sector for storage and containment structures. *“We manufacture complex steelwork with high quality assurance requirements,”* Adams concludes. *“We have the codes and facilities in house so we can offer a wide scope. If there’s multiple sets of a component, then that’s ideal for us.”*

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