

The race for space

Next week the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Enterprise Partnership will submit a formal bid to the UK Space Agency (UKSA) to establish a Spaceport in Cornwall.

If successful, we could see space flights taking off from Newquay by 2020, the target set by Government to establish the UK's first spaceport.

It might all sound fanciful, but what do we mean when we talk about a spaceport and space flights? Fundamentally it's about offering safe and low-cost access to space for a range of possible users. It might be a new satellite to monitor crops or driverless cars, for example, or in time it could be a spaceplane carrying scientific experiments or even tourists.

But don't expect to see huge rockets soaring into the skies over Watergate Bay, because that won't happen. What we are mainly talking about are horizontal launches where conventional aircraft take off in normal fashion but have a rocket attached to the wing or fuselage. Once the aircraft reaches altitude the rocket detaches and continues into space to deploy a satellite or satellites.

There are a number of commercial operators developing these payload delivery systems and we are in conversation with several of them about using Newquay Cornwall Airport because of its long runway, modern facilities, and uncongested airspace.

Another trump card is Goonhilly Earth Station, already at the forefront of satellite operations, mission control and space vehicle tracking. This means we offer the space industry a complete launch solution that no other region of the UK has. And because the airport and Goonhilly are within our Aerohub Enterprise Zone, there are incentives available to inward investors.

Our bid to the UKSA is for up to £10m to build the necessary infrastructure at Cornwall Airport Newquay. We should hear by the summer if we have been successful.

The commercial spaceflight market could be worth £25bn over the next 20 years. We believe Spaceport Cornwall could have a transformational impact on our economy by creating a high-value space cluster that would help deliver the Government's National Space Policy as well as our own Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Economic Plan.

It will mean highly paid jobs, it will link to our existing manufacturing and engineering companies providing new market opportunities, and it is already inspiring our young people to think about fantastic careers here in Cornwall.

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