SATELLITE LAUNCHES SET TO RETURN TO BRITISH SOIL AFTER 50 YEARS FOLLOWING NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH VIRGIN ORBIT IN CORNWALL

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The first British satellite launch in 50 years could take place from Cornwall within the next three years following a new partnership with Virgin Orbit.

Virgin Orbit, a satellite launch company, has selected Spaceport Cornwall as an ideal location to operate and deliver one of the first launches of its LauncherOne system outside of its US home.

The last British rocket - Black Arrow - that sent a satellite into space was launched from Australia in 1971. The new partnership deal will make history by pioneering horizontal satellite launches from UK soil.

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The news has been welcomed by **UK Science Minister Sam Gyimah**, who said: “The announcement of a strategic partnership between Virgin Orbit and Cornwall Spaceport is great news for the region and the UK’s ambitions for regular, reliable and responsible access to space. This partnership could see Virgin Orbit’s innovative horizontal launch technology helping the UK’s small satellite industry access space from the convenience of a Spaceport in Cornwall. We will work with both partners to support their ambitions, as we take the next steps in our national spaceflight programme as part of the government’s modern Industrial strategy.”

Virgin Orbit is seeking to provide launches from a Spaceport at Cornwall Airport Newquay by 2021, using a modified Boeing 747-400 aircraft called “Cosmic Girl”. Cosmic Girl will carry a LauncherOne rocket under its wing to a launch range over the Atlantic and release the rocket at around 35,000 feet for onward flight into space, carrying a satellite into Earth orbit.

As a horizontal air-launch platform, LauncherOne enables Virgin Orbit to conduct low cost missions quickly and efficiently by bypassing heavily trafficked established launch ranges. The partnership with Virgin Orbit will help position Cornwall as having the UK’s only horizontal launch facility.

Spaceport Cornwall will provide California-based Virgin Orbit with a strategic Western European location and make a major contribution to the Cornwall’s ambition to create a £1 billion space economy as part of its response the UK Industrial Strategy.

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Britain is a world-leader in the production of small satellites, supporting more than £250 billion of GDP in the wider economy, but lacks any means to get them into space. The fast-growing global satellite launch market is predicted to be worth around £10 billion over the next decade. It is estimated that up to 2,600 microsatellites (under 50kg) will require launch over the next five years alone.

Virgin Orbit will today (16 July 2018) sign the partnering agreement with Cornwall Council at Farnborough International Airshow. Work will now commence to develop a detailed plan for launch by 2021 as well as a Spaceport and Operator Licence application.

The signing of this agreement is the culmination of over a year's work by a team led and funded by the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), in partnership with Cornwall Council.

Following Virgin Orbit's commitment, Cornwall Council will consider resources to progress the project at a meeting of its Cabinet on a date to be confirmed.

Spaceport Cornwall could eventually create 480 jobs and contribute £25 million a year to the local economy. The LEP's Space Action Planpredicts that the wider space sector could create thousands more jobs in Cornwall and by 2030 be worth £1 billion a year.

Patrick McCall, Managing Director Virgin Group and Chairman of Virgin Orbit's Board of Directors, said: "Cornwall can deliver new launch capabilities for the UK quickly and efficiently by upgrading Cornwall Airport Newquay to support our horizontal air-launch platform. The Cornwall partnership allows us to grasp important market share, gain instant global launch market credibility and, with the technology already being tested in the US, further lower our risk."

Cornwall Council leader, Adam Paynter, said: "This is a game-changing partnership that will inspire a generation and create a new industry in Cornwall. The challenge now is to make the most of this hard-won opportunity so that it can deliver on its enormous potential not just for Cornwall but for the UK as a whole. We look forward to welcoming Virgin Orbit to Cornwall and working with HM Government to realise the potential."

Mark Duddridge, Chair of the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LEP, said: "Cornwall can play a key role supporting the UK Government's Industrial Strategy ambitions and we have identified space as a major opportunity for growth. The partnership with Virgin Orbit is a clear statement that Cornwall is the best UK location for horizontal launch and opens the door to a global satellite customer base. We will work with Government to maximise UK investment and jobs and make the most of the unique environment at Spaceport Cornwall. With our clear uncongested airspace and access to launch sites over the sea, it will be a vital part of a global UK offer and we look forward to working with other UK vertical launch locations to promote trade and investment."

The UK Government has a target of achieving commercial spaceflight from British soil from the end of the decade, as well as increasing the UK's share of the global space economy from 6.5% now to 10% by 2030, which would be worth an estimated £40 billion per annum.

The UK's space sector has estimated annual revenues of £13.7 billion and employs 38,500 people. It has been growing at 8% a year over the last decade, four times as fast as the rest of the UK economy.

Cornwall Airport Newquay, which is owned by Cornwall Council, was first unveiled as one of the

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UK’s potential Spaceport locations in July 2014 because of its long runway, uncongested airspace and direct access to the Atlantic Ocean.

Cornwall is already home to Goonhilly Earth Station, famous as the world’s largest satellite earth receiving station. Goonhilly is being upgraded through an £8.4m LEP-funded contract with the European Space Agency, announced in February, to become part of the deep space network, and recently secured a £24 million investment from UK billionaire Peter Hargreaves.

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