# News story: UK space sector set to benefit from new European Space Agency contract

A new rover set to visit Mars and collect the first ever samples from the planet to be brought back safely to Earth, will be designed in Stevenage by Airbus following the award of a £3.9 million contract by the European Space Agency (ESA).

The sample fetch rover will retrieve samples left by NASA's Mars 2020 rover and transfer them to an ascent vehicle. This will put them into orbit about the planet, where they will then be brought back to Earth by a separate spacecraft.

Science Minister Sam Gyimah said:

"This remarkable new project, which will see samples brought back from Mars to Earth for the first time ever, demonstrates Britain's world-leading scientific and engineering innovation.

"Winning this contract builds on the UK's world-renowned expertise in space and robotics which the government is supporting through the UK Space Agency and the major investments in our modern Industrial Strategy.

"One rover bound for Mars in 2020 is already under construction by Airbus in Stevenage and the knowledge and expertise honed there will now be applied to designing this new mission, which aims to safely deliver – for the first time – material to Earth from another planet."

The UK is a founding member of ESA, which is independent of the European Union. This means the UK's membership will continue after we leave the EU, delivering economic benefits and ensuring British companies, universities and other organisations continue to be at the forefront of space exploration, satellite manufacture and technology applications.

British ESA astronaut Tim Peake said:

"This is an exciting new era where businesses and space agencies are working closer than ever before on ambitious missions to expand our knowledge of the Solar System and deliver benefits to people's lives. The close collaboration between the UK and ESA will place Britain at the forefront of innovative missions to explore the Moon, Mars and beyond."

Tim Peake joined the science minister at the European Centre for Space Applications and Telecommunications, which employs 103 staff at Harwell and has supported hundreds of UK companies. As the leading funder of ESA's ARTES programme into telecommunications research the UK sees one in four commercial telecommunications satellites substantially built in the UK.

During the visit, the Minister and Tim Peake visited STFC RAL Space which will be the home to the National Satellite Test Facility. RAL Space’s Autonomous Systems Group are also contributing to the ESA Mars rover mission.

The UK space sector is growing, worth £13.7 billion to the economy and employing more than 38,000 people across the country. The UK is a world-leader in small satellite technology, telecommunications, robotics and earth observation, while British universities are some of the best in the world for space science. As technology evolves and reduces the cost of access to space, there is an exciting opportunity for the UK to thrive in the commercial space age.

The visit took place on the 70th anniversary of the NHS and a number of healthcare applications for space were also discussed. Last week the UK Space Agency with the support of ESA, launched a competition to find hi-tech solutions to the major health and care challenges facing the NHS, using technology originally designed for space, with up to £4m available.