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▲ The UK's first ESA astronaut, Tim Peake, announced his retirement from ESA this year but is being mooted to command the mission

## Plans for an all-UK space mission set in motion

Four British astronauts could soon be heading into orbit

**An all-UK space** mission could soon be heading into orbit with a crew of four British astronauts – and it's rumoured that veteran UK astronaut Tim Peake could be chosen to lead the mission.

US spaceflight company Axiom Space has signed a memorandum with the UK Space Agency to begin arrangements for the mission, which would conduct experiments and outreach activities over a two-week stay in orbit. The £200m price tag would be funded by commercial partners, not the UK tax payer.

"We want to put the UK at the forefront of the global race for commercial space investment, continue to support scientists and engineers to test new technologies and carry out important research and, ultimately, bring the benefits back to people and businesses across the country," says George Freeman, Minister

of State at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Few solid details about the mission have been announced so far, though previous Axiom flights have visited the International Space Station. If this were the case, then NASA would insist on a veteran astronaut heading up the crew.

Currently, that would mean former ESA astronaut Tim Peake, who flew to the station in 2015. Several news outlets reported that Peake would command the mission during the announcement, but this was still to be officially confirmed as of the time of writing. Other potential crew members include Rosemary Coogan and John McFall, who are currently training as ESA astronauts, and reserve astronaut Meganne Christian.

The UK has a thriving space industry already, and one of the goals of the

proposed mission is to highlight and encourage this area even further. The UK Space Agency has sent out a call to UK universities, research and educational institutions for proposals for projects that can run alongside the mission to highlight work being done in space in the UK.

"There are several hurdles to overcome, the financial model needs to be secured, crew selection and training. And NASA needs to approve the mission and they need to identify a slot, if it is to go to the International Space Station," said Peake, speaking on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme on 25 October.

"It's early days and there are several steps to go through, but it is fantastic that we have started the ball rolling with these exploratory discussions."

[www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-space-agency](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-space-agency)