



UK Space Expansion: Benefits for All?

Local Perceptions of the SaxaVord Spaceport



“Although views towards the spaceport were broadly supportive, there were significant reservations about a number of issues which were important to the local community. Chief among these were communications and the relationship between the spaceport and the community, and concern over the construction impacts of the spaceport. We heard that whilst at first people were welcoming of the spaceport project, they have become more disillusioned as a result of experiences with the spaceport management. Uncertainty and a lack of information about the spaceport has led to anxieties about operations at the site.”

Space Watch UK investigates and challenges the militarisation and corporate exploitation of space, focusing in particular on the UK's military space programme. Space Watch UK is a project of Drone Wars UK.

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Introduction and summary of key findings

At the beginning of May 2025 Space Watch UK visited the Shetland island of Unst for a week to investigate opinions about the SaxaVord Spaceport, which is currently under construction on the island. As one of the islanders we spoke to told us, the space sector is “not a business we understand”, so the aim of this study is to open up a debate about how the relationship between the Unst community and the spaceport can work to bring benefits to all.

Conversations were conducted with thirteen community representatives and members, or individuals with knowledge of Unst. Because Unst is a small island with a small community this involved certain sensitivities, so conversations were carried out on a non-attributable basis. We were unable to speak with young people, crofters, or representatives of the Unst Community Council during our visit. SaxaVord Spaceport was invited to take part in the study but chose not to do so.

Our investigation does not represent an academic study into opinions held by Unst residents on SaxaVord Spaceport because of the relatively small number of people we met. However, the consistency of opinion among those we spoke to suggests that the views we present here are likely to be broadly representative of the wider Unst community.

This report sets out the views and the thoughts of those we spoke to about the SaxaVord Spaceport and the issues facing Unst. We have grouped our findings into topics based on those conversations, with our own suggestions for future steps which we think would be helpful in addressing matters which were voiced.

Top-level findings from the trip are:

- Currently, most local people are cautiously optimistic about the spaceport and believe that it will definitely succeed in launching satellites from Unst.
- That said, there is considerable frustration about the slow pace of spaceport construction and its impacts, particularly on local infrastructure.
- There is limited confidence in the owners and management of the spaceport, and concerns over poor communication and the spaceport’s inter-relationships with the local community.
- Most local people think the longer term impacts in Unst will be positive, generally through secondary effects of increased tourism and service sector opportunities on the island.

- The spaceport was not considered to be a particularly big issue for Shetland, with controversy over ferry services and the Viking Energy wind farm viewed as much more significant.
- Unst's Cold War history and the Royal Air Force (RAF) presence on the island over this period was frequently mentioned and provides an important context underpinning perceptions and expectations of the spaceport by islanders.

Anonymised transcripts of conversations may be made available on request to applicants able to demonstrate a genuine scholarly interest in this topic.

Selected quotes from people Space Watch UK spoke to during this study

“I want it to happen because I want the island to survive”

“Most people probably support it but hope a rocket doesn't fall on their head or explode”

“It's not a business we understand”

“What we really need is for money to start flowing in so we can do the things we want to do, like take the tunnels project forward”

“Communications with the spaceport are not great”

“It is definitely not going to fail – it's just a question of how long it will take”

“It will go ahead. It will work”

**“Is it too big?
Too divisive?
Too secretive?”**

Broader context

As well as expressing a variety of opinions on the spaceport, people we spoke to also gave us their views on broader issues affecting Shetland and the island of Unst. These are important in their own right and are linked to issues relating to the spaceport, giving a background and historical context which help explain specific opinions about the spaceport. We have paraphrased these views in this section.

SaxaVord is at a strategic point in the UK and Europe, as the most northerly point in the UK, and this is reflected in its military history. From World War II until 2006 the RAF operated a radar station at SaxaVord, bringing up to around 200 personnel and their families onto Unst. The RAF presence was well thought of by islanders, and was considered to be a significant part of the local community. Partly because of the RAF base, Unst had a reputation for being one of the most cosmopolitan of the Shetland Islands, with the base providing opportunities to see modern films and acting as a factor in Unst receiving an electricity supply before neighbouring islands. Loss of the base resulted in business closures and a decline in the cultural, recreational, and social opportunities in the island. This has been accompanied by a general decline in wage rates across Shetland caused by a gradual scaling down of the oil sector. Currently aquaculture and tourism are important economic sectors on the island, with upwards of 10,000 visitors per season currently visiting Unst.

In 1995 there were well over 1000 residents in Unst. Shortly afterwards Chevron Oil ceased their operations at Unst airport, resulting in the loss of oil company and air traffic personnel from the island. By the mid 2000s, following wind down and closure of the RAF base, this had decreased to around 650. Today a relatively high proportion of the island's population (estimates of between 40-60%) are aged over 60. The island's junior school is consequently not as busy as it was during the RAF days, and several years ago there were plans to close it. The local community put up a strong fight to keep it open, but the episode led to a realisation that the island is in a vulnerable position.

The ferry service between islands is a major concern for Unst residents. Ferry boats are ageing and the service is dysfunctional, and problems can be exacerbated when places on ferries are overbooked and drivers do not turn up to travel. Those we spoke to felt that inter-island tunnels or bridges would allow more reliable transport between islands and provide freedom and flexibility to islanders, for example to take up a job in Lerwick or travel there for a medical appointment. There are tunnels between islands in the Faroe Islands and a local action group is pushing for construction of tunnels in Shetland and has

raised money through crowdfunding to conduct a feasibility study.¹ Before this, however, new ferries will be needed and there are concerns that investment in new ferries will be used as an excuse to avoid investment in tunnels. It was emphasised to us that the spaceport is not the biggest issue in Shetland – contention over ferries and the Viking wind farm are felt to be far more controversial.²



1 Unst & Yell Tunnels Shetland. <https://shetlandtunnels.co.uk/>

2 For more about the Viking wind farm see Marianne Brown: 'The Shetland Way: Community and Climate Crisis on my Father's Islands', HarperCollins Publishing, 2025.

Views on SaxaVord Spaceport

This section of the report summarises comments and opinions which we heard which relate specifically to the SaxaVord Spaceport project.

General impressions

Most of the local people we spoke to are currently cautiously optimistic about the spaceport, although there was considerable frustration about a number of factors in the spaceport's development process.

Almost all those we spoke to expressed measured support for the spaceport project, and certainly felt that far more people in Unst were in favour of the project than were opposed. It was hoped that the spaceport would have positive economic benefits by bringing money and jobs to Unst and stimulating tourism. There was also recognition and support for the scientific and technical benefits of space programmes. Despite initial scepticism and a slow start, it was felt that the spaceport is now a credible venture that is likely to succeed as a business. At the same time it was recognised that there were 'cons' as well as 'pros' associated with the spaceport; that it was still early days for the project; there are uncertainties about how things might play out; and what the longer term impacts might be. A few people took the view that those on the island who are opposed to the spaceport seem mainly to be incomers who came to Unst and want it to be an "island paradise".

Although views towards the spaceport were broadly supportive, there were significant reservations about a number of issues which were important to the local community. Chief among these were communications and the relationship between the spaceport and the community, and concern over the construction impacts of the spaceport. We heard that whilst at first people were welcoming of the spaceport project, they have become more disillusioned as a result of experiences with the spaceport management. Uncertainty and a lack of information about the spaceport has led to anxieties about operations at the site.

In early days the spaceport had been "ticking all the right boxes - educational contact, support in the community, consultation", but now "we don't know how whole-hearted they are". Communications have gradually dried up and confidence has eroded as a result of a lack of consistency between what senior personnel at the spaceport say and what actually happens. There was a strong view that the spaceport's leadership had a habit of talking up the project over and above reality, and were prone to giving commitments that they were unable

to deliver on. Repeated claims that the spaceport will start launching rockets “later this year” – made over a period of several years – have undermined the credibility of the spaceport and its management.

As a result, some people feel that there is a “culture of secrecy and bad stewardship” around the spaceport, and that “support is waning fast”. Two examples were given to support this view. Suspension of work at the SaxaVord construction site in August 2023³ and an explosion during a test of a rocket engine in August 2024⁴ were both highly visible incidents raising concerns for local people, but over which there had been no direct communication with the Unst community from the spaceport management. Further concerns related to allegations of late payment to contractors and subcontractors working at the construction site and poor health and safety procedures at the site.

At this stage, somewhat weary following a series of delays and obstacles, islanders feel that the spaceport must “just start firing rockets”. As one islander told us, it has been a difficult journey over the construction period but things are likely to improve when the spaceport is operational. People are likely to forget the problems as long as the project ultimately succeeds. There is optimism among local people that the spaceport will not fail, although recognition that this would not be the end of the journey. Some felt that the price of success would be that the spaceport’s ownership would change hands at some time in the future. Others accepted that it would bring change to Unst, and that despite positive memories of community interactions with the RAF in the past, future relations with the spaceport would take a different course.

Economic opportunities and employment

Unst needs a functioning economy, and the islanders we spoke to said that the spaceport would probably be helpful in stimulating the local economy. The island needs something to provide jobs and “no-one has a better idea than the spaceport”. Crofting offers a viable contribution to a family’s income, but is rarely adequate in itself as a livelihood. Although tourism has been promoted over recent years and is seen by many as the best bet for the island, Unst lacks tourism infrastructure and suffers the disadvantage of being ‘the last stop on the line’ and well away from established tourist centres.

To date some Unst residents have worked on the construction site at the spaceport, and others have jobs at the spaceport in support roles such as administration, education, and communications. We also heard that a local trainee technician has been taken on at the spaceport. However, there was a consensus that so far the vast majority of jobs at the spaceport have been for people from off the island. When the spaceport project commenced its representatives said that it would be setting up programmes to train local people for technical roles, but so far this has not happened in any systematic way. In fact, we were told that no posts at the spaceport had been advertised or offered through any of the normal recruitment routes in Unst. Even catering work was undertaken by contractors from off the island, with catering staff being brought in for periods of three weeks or so.

³ Andrew Parsonson: ‘SaxaVord Owes Contractors Money it Can’t Pay’. European Spaceflight, 16 November 2023. <https://europeanspaceflight.com/saxavord-owes-contractors-money-it-cant-pay/>

⁴ ‘Rocket engine explodes during test at Shetland spaceport’. BBC News Scotland, 19 August 2024. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy54wqzz0kvo>

In principle there should be employment opportunities at the spaceport when it becomes operational. However, there was scepticism as to how many technical opportunities will be available to Unst islanders even then. The general view was that launch companies will bring their own technical personnel in and out with them for a launch, and that those jobs at the spaceport which are available to islanders will be relatively unsophisticated service-type posts.

To date local beneficiaries from the spaceport project have been some construction subcontractors and local shops, especially the Final Checkout. The main beneficiary was considered to be the leisure centre, with custom from spaceport workers. In future, the winners from the spaceport project were expected to be people who are already established local traders, such as transport and accommodation businesses. People who do not already operate in such areas would be unlikely to gain much economic benefit from the spaceport project.

There were mixed views about whether and how the spaceport would impact upon tourism in Unst. One view was that the spaceport will bring tourists to Unst: indeed, some visitors are already interested in the spaceport and asking to be told when launches will take place. There has been a lot of interest from the spaceport from outside the island, to the extent that islanders are getting weary of people visiting to talk about it. If this interest is sustained, the spaceport has potential to have a large impact on tourism in Unst, as visitors will need accommodation, transport, and food.

Another view was that, even though “tourists amaze you with the things they might like to see”, few people would be likely to make the long and complicated journey to Unst just to see a rocket launch, and that interest in launches would be limited to people from a relatively local catchment, and then probably only for the first few launches.

There is still a great deal of uncertainty over whether space-related tourism will develop in Unst, but one positive view was that people in Unst are “good at catching the ball” and creating opportunities: they are off-beat and lively and so will find interesting ways of adapting and using space and the spaceport as a hook for tourism. People in Unst are now talking about the spaceport not as a possibility but as a probability, with the opportunities it brings. One person we spoke to mentioned their plans to develop accommodation and an associated project which they probably would not have decided to take forward had it not been for the spaceport.

Suggestion

Unst Community Council: Identify specific opportunities for the island arising from the development of the spaceport and evaluate and support these more systematically through future rounds of the community planning processes.



Job advertisement on Unst noticeboard

Interaction with the Unst community

SaxaVord Spaceport are keen to emphasise their good relationship with the local community. “They really seem to have thought about how you make this work in a number of ways, not just economically and commercially, but also in terms of being an asset in the community too”, said Patricia Ferguson MP, chair of the UK Parliament’s Scottish Affairs Committee, reflecting after a recent visit to the spaceport. “The fact that they have got so many plans for the future, how they want to expand and the other things that they could do including engagement with the community was also very impressive”.⁵

Members of the Unst community who we spoke to had rather a different opinion. To local people the spaceport seems separate from island life and spaceport people tend not to mingle with islanders. This is compared unfavourably with times past when the RAF made efforts to integrate into the community, for example by organising joint events and through adept public relations work. Many people in Unst remember those days positively and had hoped that relations with the spaceport would be the same.

Recently the spaceport seems to have been focusing on promotion to possible funders and political supporters, but less so on its links with the local community. There are occasional VIP visitors to the spaceport, such as Ms Ferguson’s committee and other senior political and military figures, but these visitors have no interaction with the local community who only find out afterwards from other sources about their visits. As one person told us, “It’s all as if there’s no local population”.

At the time of our visit we were told that around 50-60 construction workers are engaged at the SaxaVord Spaceport site. The vast majority of them are from off the island, and they eat and sleep there, work long hours, and are not seen in the community very often. Many of the personnel currently at the spaceport are shift workers and are mainly male, which perhaps explains why they remain separate from the local community, but there was a strong view among those we spoke to that islanders would welcome more interaction with people from the spaceport. One spaceport worker has been involved in the island’s festival organising committee, which was welcome but was considered unusual enough to be a cause for comment.

Communication and consultation

Closely linked to the issue of the spaceport’s involvement with the local community is the issue of communication with the community. Islanders we spoke to told us that the spaceport is poor at communicating with the local community. We were advised that the spaceport has not recently organised community engagement activities; has ceased attending meetings of Unst community council; and does not respond to communications from the community council. Again, this is compared unfavourably with approaches adopted by the RAF, who a few years ago installed a new radar dome on top of SaxaVord hill and undertook a comprehensive communications campaign beforehand.

⁵ Hans J Marter: ‘Parliamentary committee confident of more government support for SaxaVord Spaceport’. Shetland News, 13 May 2025. <https://www.shetnews.co.uk/2025/05/13/parliamentary-committee-confident-government-support/>

Things have not always been like this. When the spaceport project first started there were community engagement meetings, events, and guided minibus tours of the site which were considered to be very positive. People felt they had the chance to have their say and were able to be involved in the decision on whether to grant planning permission for the spaceport. Unfortunately the timetable of public engagement activities has petered out, and recently the spaceport appears to have focused efforts on attracting policymakers, industry contacts, and potential funders.

Communications with islanders and the public now seem to be largely through occasional press releases and Facebook. Facebook is a sound choice as it is a popular medium for communication in Unst. The spaceport's Facebook page⁶ seems to be regularly updated, although the emphasis of its content tends towards corporate public relations rather than matters of community interest. At the time of our visit in May, the latest issue of the spaceport's community magazine 'SaxaVoice' had been published in November 2024, with a subsequent edition following in June 2025.⁷ The magazine appears to be available only online: paper copies are not distributed in the community.

It is frustrating for the community, and for some, worrying, if they are not informed about what is going on at the spaceport. For example, concern was expressed that communication from the spaceport about the engine test explosion in August 2024 was poor. Local people were not informed about the incident and only found out about it through BBC news reports. In the absence of clear and informative communication and with the spaceport remote from the community, rumours develop.

SaxaVord Spaceport has received funding from public sources, and this brings with it obligations to the public.⁸ Local people have a right to understand what is happening at a site which they are, in part, paying towards. The local people we spoke to expressed a strong preference for community meetings and events as a means of dialogue with the spaceport. Once again, we heard that the RAF had been good at organising community events when they had a presence in Unst. When the spaceport has organised events in the past these have been drop-in sessions rather than community meetings. There is a view that the spaceport will not hold open community meetings because they will not like what they will hear at such meetings.

There was a strong view among the islanders we spoke to that to improve relations between the spaceport and the community, the spaceport could organise more events to include local people and allow them to meet spaceport workers. The Space Bar at the spaceport is a good place for meeting people and is potentially a good location for such events (though it is currently not open to the public), as well as the three public halls in the island.

Some of those we spoke to in Unst felt that community organisations in Sutherland had been canny in their negotiations with the Sutherland Spaceport developers, and there had been talk that the Unst community council should make contact to share experiences with them, and possibly with communities in the vicinity of other spaceports around the world.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/saxavordspace>

⁷ November 2024 edition: <https://saxavord.com/new-edition-of-saxavoice-out-now/>
June 2025 edition: <https://saxavord.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/SSP-SaxaVoice-Issue-6-JUNE-2025.pdf>

⁸ The UK government provided £10 million in funding to SaxaVord Spaceport in 2024. See 'Oral evidence: Scotland's space sector follow-up: launch. Scottish Affairs Committee, HC 671. 5 February 2025. Question 7. <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15340/default/>

Suggestions

SaxaVord Spaceport: Resume communications with Unst Community Council and attend meetings on a regular basis to provide updates on spaceport operations.

SaxaVord Spaceport and Unst Community Council: Consider setting up a local liaison group as a channel for dialogue between the community and the spaceport. The group should meet regularly (one or twice a year), be chaired independently, and be open to the public and the media, with all able to ask questions at meetings.

SaxaVord Spaceport: Arrange a programme of community events to help inform local people about forthcoming activities at the spaceport.

Unst Community Council: Aim to make contact and share experiences with community councils elsewhere in Scotland which are affected by space-related developments.

Education work

SaxaVord Spaceport has a STEM-focused website for school children, and resources for teachers and educators, including lesson plans, are available on the site.⁹ Occasional educational activities are publicised on the spaceport's Facebook page, and the spaceport has undertaken educational outreach work with the school in Unst and schools elsewhere on Shetland.

We heard positive accounts of the effort that the spaceport has put into working with schools, which included a Space Week at Baltasound Junior High School in Unst in which both the Spaceport and UK Space Agency were involved, geared around elements of the national curriculum.

It is less clear how students from Unst who wish to enter a career in the space sector will be supported. We were informed that such students would need to study a relevant course at university, most likely on the UK mainland, after which they may or may not return to Unst. The University of the Highlands and Islands offers engineering based courses, but as yet offers no training geared directly to the space sector. We heard that although the university and spaceport have been in dialogue and talk publicly about vocational training, in reality there is no money supporting such training and little of substance has emerged yet.

Suggestions

SaxaVord Spaceport: Continue to work with a broad range of educators in Unst and ensure that educational work on space issues recognises a balanced range of perspectives, not just government priorities.

SaxaVord Spaceport: Work with the University of the Highlands and Islands to maintain a watching brief on sources of funding for joint vocational training for space-related industries.

⁹ <https://www.fredomissioncentre.com/>

Impact on island infrastructure

The impact of SaxaVord Spaceport on the island infrastructure of Unst was a major topic in the conversations we had, with both concerns over how existing infrastructure will cope with future demand and hopes that the spaceport's presence would lead to an upgrade in infrastructure.

In terms of immediate issues, we heard that impact from spaceport construction traffic is a cause of concern for some people, particularly residents in Haroldswick and Norwick in the vicinity of the spaceport. There was felt to be a relatively high volume of construction traffic. Although money has been spent to improve roads near Lamba Ness, there was a view that the improvement work was not done to a high standard and that heavy construction traffic has damaged roads in the area, which are in a poor state of repair. Those we spoke to said they thought that roads should be reinstated to their former condition when spaceport construction work has been completed.



Concerns were raised about impacts resulting from construction work at the SaxaVord spaceport

The impact from spaceport traffic on local ferries was felt to be significant. Even before the spaceport development the ferry service was well-used and now it is considered to be under pressure, especially at peak times. It was pointed out that a construction lorry such as a cement mixer will take up space equivalent to four cars on a ferry. Block pre-booking of spaces on ferries had also been blamed on the spaceport, although when we explored this point it was acknowledged that the problem might actually not be the result of spaceport bookings alone and may possibly derive from multiple different ferry users.

Impact on ferries has a number of consequences. One difficulty which was flagged up was the risk of not being able to attend medical appointments or other important business off the island if ferry spaces are occupied by other traffic. Impact on tourism was also highlighted, with the risk that visitors to Unst who have booked places on guided tours might be unable to get to the island. Local tourist-related businesses reportedly saw takings drop last year when compared with previous years, and some businesses are cutting back their services as a result. There were also concerns that ferry capacity will not be able to cope if demand increases, for example during the summer, or if there are 'surges' of personnel and deliveries to the spaceport around the time of a launch,

or if space-related tourism eventually leads to increases in the numbers of visitors to Unst. Indeed there are already clear signs that the ferries cannot meet demand at peak times – for example an unknown number of people decided not to go to UnstFest events in July 2025 because too many ferries were showing as fully booked.

Inter-island tunnels are seen by many as a more viable future transport option than ferries, and an action group is planning to undertake a study into the feasibility of building tunnels between Unst, Yell, and Shetland mainland. Given the combined population of the Northern Isles is only around 2000, there were hopes that the business and strategic importance of the spaceport might help in pushing it up the government agenda.

At the time of our visit work was underway to introduce high speed fibre-optic broadband to Unst. Some people felt that the spaceport may have been a factor accelerating this programme. Another view was that the two projects are not linked, but that the spaceport is very opportunistic in its public relations and might well take credit “because we are here” for positive outcomes, for example the broadband upgrade, improved roads, or new tunnels.

The issue of the airport at Baltasound was also raised. The airport, which was originally built to transfer workers to offshore oil fields, has been out of public service since 1996. It was then used by islanders as a general amenity area until the Spaceport announced in 2020 its intention to incorporate it into a local space industry hub. It is now used primarily for assembly purposes and as a ground-based station by the spaceport and is closed to the public.¹⁰ This has resulted in a loss of access to the airfield site for local people. On the other hand, there were hopes that success for the spaceport project might see the airport re-opening, offering flights to Sumburgh to meet demand from spaceport customers.

Suggestion

SaxaVord Spaceport: Work with the local community to identify areas where roads need to be reinstated to their former condition when construction work has been completed, and commission the necessary work.

Launches, safety, and the spaceport ‘exclusion zone’

People who we spoke to in Unst had a number of questions about arrangements for launches from the SaxaVord Spaceport. We heard a number of concerns about the ‘exclusion zone’ for the spaceport site.¹¹ Residents were not clear about how big the zone is and how far it extends from the launch pad, and whether homes near Lamba Ness are within it. We were also told that Unst’s community fire service “didn’t get much of a heads-up” about the fire resulting from the August 2024 engine test failure, and it is not clear what role they would play in an emergency at the site.

There were also questions about arrangements for visitors who wish to observe launches from the spaceport. In the past the spaceport has made conflicting comments about whether launches will be marketed for tourism purposes. At one stage local residents were told by the spaceport owners that the first launch would not be marketed for tourists although local people would

¹⁰ ‘Baltasound airfield to become part of space centre plans’. Shetland News, 20 March 2020. <https://www.shetnews.co.uk/2020/03/20/baltasound-airfield-to-become-part-of-space-centre-plans/>

¹¹ It was not always clear what was meant by the term ‘exclusion zone’ so we have taken it to mean an area around the launch pad within which there should be no people for safety reasons when a launch or test is taking place.

be allowed to watch. They have also been told that roads will be closed in some areas for safety reasons, though details have not been provided. In the longer term, if launches do attract visitors to Unst, there is likely to be an impact on the local infrastructure, including ferries.

Various factors are likely to influence time windows when launches are able to take place from the spaceport. The most significant of these are any restrictions on launching during the bird breeding season – which covers much of the period from May to mid- August – and high winds or poor weather which may prevent launches from taking place, particularly in winter.¹² Several of those we spoke to wondered whether these limitations would constrain launch opportunities from SaxaVord, or whether launches would in fact take place during the breeding season.

Suggestions

SaxaVord Spaceport: Clarify safety arrangements for launches, including ‘exclusion zone’ issues. This could most effectively be done by delivering an information card to all homes in Unst with information about safety arrangements, a map of the exclusion zone, and emergency procedures. The card should also be available on the spaceport website.

SaxaVord Spaceport: Publish a notice at least one week ahead of a planned launch to inform residents and interested parties that the launch is planned and any restrictions this may cause (eg closures of roads or sea areas). This should supplement formal notices to airmen and mariners. The notice should be distributed to interested parties, the local media, and be available on the spaceport website and social media sites.

Civil Aviation Authority: Publish standards for establishing safety zones relating to spaceport sites. These should be easily accessible and written in plain English. Licensing conditions for spaceports should make it a mandatory obligation for spaceports to publish public safety information relating to launch operations.

SaxaVord Spaceport: Work with Unst Community Council to agree a strategy for promoting launches to the public beyond Unst, and plan accordingly.

SaxaVord Spaceport: Clarify any restrictions on launches from its site and publicise any time windows when it does not anticipate being able to conduct launches.

Fishery impacts

Parties with an interest in local fisheries anticipated that there would be closures of certain waters and fishing grounds when launches take place in order to prevent risks from falling debris. This may affect smaller inshore boats, including boats in Unst. There were particular worries about possible situations where poor weather delays a launch, and continues to delay it, leading to extended closure of a fishing area.

Fisherfolk would like to be given as much notice as possible before launches take place. This needs to be at least a couple of days in advance, and not on the day of the launch itself, as by then they will have made fishing arrangements for the day. Before a launch a notice to mariners warning of any restriction needs to be sent to local fisherfolk and published to warn other shipping in the area.

¹² ‘Standing Advice for Planning Consultations – Birds’. NatureScot, August 2024.
<https://www.nature.scot/doc/standing-advice-planning-consultations-birds>

It is common practice to have guard vessels in place around restricted areas to warn vessels away, and this task could be contracted to local fisherfolk to help compensate for any loss in livelihood caused by launches.

Suggestion

SaxaVord Spaceport: Liaise with local fishing representatives to set up a simple process for notifying fisherfolk of impending launches.

Environment

Comments were made about rocket debris falling into the sea during launches. This was viewed with disfavour, as most other industries are not permitted to abandon waste at sea. There were particular concerns that rocket debris would remain on the sea bottom and might in future damage fishing gear. Rocket debris should be minimised and recovered from the sea after launch.

There were different views about the environmental impacts of the spaceport. Most of those we spoke to were aware that mapping and environmental surveys, including surveys of birds and otters, had been undertaken at the site. The people we spoke to considered these to have been reasonably thorough, and thought that the spaceport was considered to have done as much as it could to protect the environment.

Although concerns were expressed about construction stage impacts of the project (see above) it was accepted that these were temporary in nature. The longer term operational impacts of the spaceport remain uncertain, but they were felt likely by islanders we spoke to to be reasonably local in scope and arrangements have been made to monitor them.

There were some comments that statements made in the past by the spaceport owners about an access tunnel for otters and a whale-watching viewpoint had come to nothing, and also in some cases misunderstandings about the scale of the rockets that would be launched from the site.

Suggestions

SaxaVord Spaceport: Require launch companies using its site to minimise launch debris, with the aim of moving to a zero waste position. Efforts should be made to recover debris from the sea and schemes should be established to reward fisherfolk for recovery of debris or pay compensation for damage shown to be caused by spaceport-related debris.

SaxaVord Spaceport: Continue arrangements for environmental monitoring of spaceport impacts to maintain confidence that the impacts of its operations are acceptable.

SaxaVord Spaceport: Hold a 'community briefing' event before the first launch from the spaceport to provide the community with details of the launch, answer questions, and tackle any misconceptions about the launch.

Scope of future development

As well as the launch site itself, we were informed that secondary developments are under consideration as part of the spaceport complex.

We heard that the spaceport has applied for planning permission for a car park intended for tourist visitors. It was alleged that the application related to a site which did not belong to the spaceport, and that the spaceport had not consulted with the landowner before submitting the application.

Other plans for future development which have at various times been discussed by the spaceport owners include a visitors centre, a data centre, and a hotel. There has also been discussion on the possibility of re-opening Unst's airport.

Suggestion

SaxaVord Spaceport: In due course publish a site development strategy document for consultation with the local community and planning authorities.

Community benefit funding

In the past the spaceport has provided funding for various local projects, such as equipment for local sports teams. This has been on a casual grace-and-favour basis, and some of those we spoke to had been disappointed that expectations of funding for other local projects had not been met.

While accepting that the spaceport may not at present be making large profits, there was a view that it should put something back into the community, especially when, as hoped, it moves into the black. A transparent and independently managed community benefit fund is needed, and now is the time to start planning for this. This should not be difficult to set up, as such schemes have been widely used in Shetland, for example by the oil industry, Viking Energy, and Cooke Aquaculture.

Suggestions

SaxaVord Spaceport: Prioritise setting up a community development fund, run by independent trustees. Funding awarded by the trust should match priorities in the Unst community action plan. The Scottish Government has published guidelines for community benefit schemes for other sectors, and any scheme set up by the spaceport should comply with these guidelines.¹³

Scottish Government: Work with the space industry to develop guidelines for community liaison and benefit schemes for the space sector, given the role it is hoped that space will play in the future of Scotland's economy.

¹³ 'Community benefits from onshore renewable energy developments'. Scottish Government, 8 May 2019. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-good-practice-principles-community-benefits-onshore-renewable-energy-developments/>

Other Issues

During our discussions with islanders two particular topics did not arise which Space Watch UK nonetheless considers to be important on the basis of experiences of communities located close to spaceports in other parts of the world and environmental scientists.

Military aspects of spaceport operations

In conversations that broached the use of SaxaVord Spaceport for military or dual-use satellite launches, those that we spoke to in Unst did not articulate a strong opinion on the topic. It appears likely, from our discussions, that a general familiarity with the idea of a military presence in Unst – based on broadly positive community associations with the former RAF base at the SaxaVord site – makes the prospect of military activity at the spaceport generally unthreatening in the minds of local people. However, SaxaVord’s approach to communications with residents suggests the spaceport could do more to clarify the likely military aspects of its operations. As an organisation concerned about the militarisation of space and committed to an end to the proliferation of new forms of military technology, Space Watch UK is aware that risks posed by an expansion of military space capabilities are likely to become increasingly significant for both people and the planet. These include the possibility of war in space and the possibility that spaceport sites, as ground infrastructure for the militarily important space sector, may become targets of aggression in periods of conflict.¹⁴ These possibilities raise issues for communities living near spaceport sites, and therefore dialogue between spaceport operators and local people needs to address the extent to which operations have a military role.

Suggestion

SaxaVord Spaceport and launch companies operating from the spaceport:

Adopt a policy of transparency about the nature of the payloads being launched from the site and make details of payloads and clients available to the public.

¹⁴ Sarah Knapton: ‘The British military base preparing for war in space’. The Telegraph, 7 June 2025. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/06/07/space-command-china-russia-north-korea-war-satellites/>
 Lee Billings: ‘War in Space May Be Closer Than Ever’. Scientific American, 10 August 2015. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/war-in-space-may-be-closer-than-ever/>

Atmospheric impacts

Although not specifically mentioned by islanders, there are concerns from atmospheric scientists about the effects of space rocket launches on the upper atmosphere. There is evidence that carbon and alumina deposits and water vapour from rockets travelling through the atmosphere may have accumulative effects on, for example, the depletion of the ozone layer. SaxaVord Spaceport states that it will use 'clean' rocket fuels such as propane to power launches. However, although propane may be less harmful than some propellants, it is not completely harmless and generates combustion products that enter the atmosphere and may accumulate in ecosystems. It has been reported that combustion products, including fine particles and chemical compounds, can settle on the ground or in bodies of water and may lead to soil and water contamination. This may in turn have impacts on local flora and fauna.¹⁵

Suggestion

SaxaVord Spaceport: As part of environmental monitoring programmes, make data available to universities working in the field of upper atmosphere chemistry to help improve understanding of the atmospheric impacts of space launches.



View of spaceport from
Ward of Norwick Hill

¹⁵ 'NOAA scientists link exotic metal particles in the upper atmosphere to rockets, satellites'. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. 16 October 2023. <https://research.noaa.gov/2023/10/16/noaa-scientists-link-exotic-metal-particles-in-the-upper-atmosphere-to-rockets-satellites/>
Ivan Yatskov: 'The Propane Fog: What Is the SaxaVord Spaceport Hiding?' Orbital Today, 13 March 2025. <https://orbitaltoday.com/2025/03/13/the-propane-fog-whats-hiding-the-saxavord-spaceport/>

Conclusion

The majority of people we spoke to in Unst are currently guardedly in favour of the SaxaVord Spaceport development and hope that it will play an important role in sustaining the economy in Unst. They wish to see the spaceport operating and rockets launching successfully in anticipation that this will eventually result in broader benefits to the island in terms of an upswing in tourist interest and improved transport links with the Shetland mainland.

However, this does not translate as unqualified support for everything the spaceport does. There is disappointment and disgruntlement at the slow pace of construction work and the inconvenience that this has caused; poor communication from the spaceport and the lack of integration by spaceport personnel with the local community; and commitments which have been given in the past by the spaceport management which have as yet failed to materialise. There are unanswered questions about the future impacts of the spaceport in Unst and its infrastructure, and these will need to be addressed by the community working together with the spaceport.

To its credit, SaxaVord Spaceport has published a statement of its values on its website for everyone to see.¹⁶ It is reasonable for members of the public to hold the spaceport to account to these values, which include being driven by integrity. As a company which in part is publicly funded, the spaceport has an obligation to act in the public interest, and this means paying heed to any concerns the local community may have about its activities.

Unst's Cold War history and the strategic location of the island were frequently alluded to during our conversations with islanders. There is little doubt that many, if not the majority, of satellites launched from SaxaVord Spaceport will have military functions.¹⁷ Will the spaceport therefore represent a new chapter for military involvement on the island? Unst has had a relationship with the military in the past, but this time it will be different: rather than with the armed forces, the relationship will be with commercial technology, arms, and space sector companies. It is too early to say how this will play out, but in some cases such relationships have led to dependencies which are not in the long-term interests of the host community – particularly if the community is located in a remote region.¹⁸ It will be important for Unst to be aware of this and ensure that the island's economy retains a diverse base.

¹⁶ <https://saxavord.com/values/>

¹⁷ 'NATO delegates shown vital SaxaVord Spaceport and RFA launch capabilities after STARLIFT meeting'. Press release, SaxaVord Spaceport, 19 May 2025. <https://saxavord.com/nato-delegates-shown-vital-saxavord-spaceport-and-rfa-launch-capabilities-after-starlift-talks/>

¹⁸ Simon Commander: 'One-company towns: Scale and consequences'. Altura Partners, IE Business School, and IZA, March 2018. <https://wol.iza.org/uploads/articles/433/pdfs/one-company-towns-scale-and-consequences.pdf>

One of the people we spoke to during our visit to Shetland spoke about the concept of 'the invitation' when working on community projects.¹⁹ Outsiders need to offer an attractive invitation to the local community and get their consent to come in and work with them. They then have an obligation to deliver on that invitation. To what extent did SaxaVord Spaceport receive a full invitation to work in Unst, and has it lost trust over time for not honouring its invitation? To recover ground, the spaceport can stick to the terms on which it entered the Unst community and treat the community with respect through open and honest communication. It is in the strong interests of both the spaceport and the community to communicate effectively and tackle the challenges of the future together.



Radomes at Baltasound Airport

¹⁹ An appeal that invites people to take part in something that offers them an experience of possibility and invites them to engage with social and ecological issues. For an academic discussion of this concept see Peter Westoby and John Owen: 'The sociality and geometry of community development practice', *Community Development Journal*, Volume 45 Issue 1, January 2010, P58-74. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsp005>

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