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# Campaigners lobby for 'catapult' hub to propel steel innovation

Chris Tighe

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Ministers are under pressure from industry groups to support UK steel by setting up an innovation centre to encourage developments and productivity growth in steel and other sectors.

The survival struggles of Tata Steel UK, and last year's closure of the Redcar steel works, have, campaigners fear, given a picture of an industry rooted in the past and in decline.

They argue that the UK has internationally recognised strengths in developing and using materials in its universities, specialist bodies and companies, but needs government support to maximise the potential.

"It's all there; it just needs to be joined up; these are really valuable national assets," said Chris McDonald, chief executive of the Materials Processing Institute, (MPI) one of the campaigners for a materials "catapult" centre.

While China was, he said, the "big beast" of global steel, the UK had advantages of adaptability,

diversity and internationalisation.

But Mr McDonald also warned that the UK's supply chain in industries including aerospace, nuclear and automotives would be at risk unless UK innovation in materials, including steel, ceramics, glass, titanium and aluminium, continued. "We would be fast followers, not innovators," he warned.

The government has so far set up nine catapult centres that aim to boost the UK's capability for innovation in specific areas and drive economic growth.

Sectors covered include high value manufacturing, digital, medical and offshore renewable energy.

The not-for-profit, independent centres, overseen by Innovate UK, the UK's innovation agency, connect businesses with the research and academic communities.

Redcar-based MPI dates back to an earlier wave of government initiatives.

It's all there; it just needs to be joined up; these are really valuable national assets

- Chris McDonald, Materials Processing Institute

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It was founded in 1944 as the British Iron and Steel Research Association, to build postwar expertise. MPI and The Welding Institute, together with the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining, are leading the lobbying.

Supporters include UK Steel, the Confederation of British Industry, the Engineering Employers Federation and the Federation of Small Businesses as well as universities including Imperial, Cambridge, Manchester and Sheffield. They also have cross-party MP support.

The materials catapult centre should be headquartered at MPI in Redcar, they say. They want £5m revenue support and £2m capital annually from government, plus an initial £10m to fund equipment. They expect a benefit of £15 per £1 of government spending.

The department for business, innovation and skills said it was considering the proposal. BIS has offered a package worth hundreds of millions of pounds to potential buyers of Tata Steel UK.

"The steel industry is vital to the UK and we are doing everything we can to help secure a long-term viable future," said BIS.

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