

# Business

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**The Gazette**

## CHRIS TURNS ON THE CHARM FOR TEESSIDE

INTERVIEW: PAGE 3





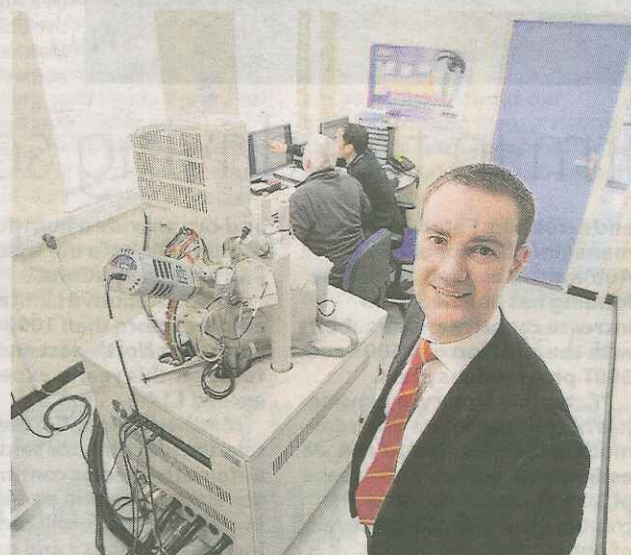


■ Chris McDonald, CEO, of the Materials Processing Institute (MPI), is getting Westminster's political big-hitters on side

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# Chris is making political moves for excellence



## » Factfile

**Who has inspired you most (could be real-life or public figure)?**

My dad.

**Biggest achievement (personal or professional)?**

Marrying my wife, Claire.

**What car do you drive?**

Ford Mondeo.

**What's your favourite restaurant?**

El Coto, a Spanish restaurant in Durham.

**Favourite food?**

Rhubarb crumble with custard.

**Favourite tippie?**

Real ale, particularly the ale made by the Durham Brewery.

**Who or what makes you laugh?**

Anything silly.

**What's your ideal job, other than the one you've got?**

I'd be a parliamentarian.

**What's your greatest fear?**

Not having a job.

**What's the best piece of business advice you have ever received?**

Understand how to add value to your customer's business.

**What's your business mantra?**

Behave with integrity and place trust and confidence in others.

**What's your biggest extravagance?**

Suits!

**How do you relax and unwind?**

Going for days out with the kids. I don't take work home with me in the evenings and at weekends.

**Where is your favourite Teesside place?**

Standing on top of Roseberry Topping.

IF he wasn't the CEO of a cutting-edge research and development company, Chris McDonald would fancy a career in politics, influencing public policy debates in the corridors of Westminster.

But as luck would have it, his day job allows him to hobnob with the likes of business secretary Vince Cable and the Government's chief scientific adviser, Sir Mark Walport.

Chris has every reason for wanting to keep these political big-hitters onside. As managing director of the Materials Processing Institute (MPI), he's bidding to persuade ministers to formally recognise the organisation as a "Catapult Centre" - a move that would cement the Grangetown-based facility as a leading UK hub for the commercialisation of industrial materials research and development (R&D).

A decision is highly unlikely before the May General Election but that hasn't stopped Chris from telling politicians of all persuasions about the great innovations happening on Teesside.

Founded in 1945, MPI started life as the R&D arm of Brit-

ish Steel and more recently Tata Steel, before returning to independent ownership late last year. In doing so, it has opened its doors to companies outside of the steel sector, including those that want to discover the commercial potential of graphene, nickel, glass and ceramics applications.

Chris says: "Steel accounts for about 50% of what we do so there's no way we are forgetting about this important sector. Now, though, we're dealing with many different companies, allowing them to develop their technologies and see if they can make money from them."

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"Gaining catapult status would make it easier to attract funding in the future. The Government has said they are committed to creating more catapult centres and we'd like to think we're in with a good chance."

One thing in Chris' favour is MPI's strong financial position.

While other R&D centres are heavily reliant on the public purse, MPI generates around 90% of its £6.5m annual turnover directly from industry. That will please politicians, with the next Government unlikely to have much spare cash as it bids to cut Britain's deficit.

Chris is also keen to bend the ear of politicians about MPI's diversification plans, which include a new training centre to upskill science and engineering PhD students and a technology accelerator facility to help SMEs commercialise their R&D.

Chris says: "For the technology accelerator we've applied for £3m of funding from the Local Growth Fund and we're expecting a decision on that within the next few weeks. It will provide opportunities for SMEs to realise the commercial benefits of their technologies."

"The Centre for Doctoral Training will work with students from Durham, Sheffield

and Newcastle universities. It's important that their science and engineering PhDs have a business focus, as we're in the business of commercialising R&D."

"There needs to be more entrepreneurship in the materials sector. The hope is that some of the students will start their own businesses after finishing their doctorates - and then they will be able to benefit from the SME technology accelerator."

The training centre will be funded by the universities and industry and Chris aims to have it up and running by October. His forward-thinking, can-do attitude has helped him during a career which now sees him leading an 80-strong workforce at the age of just 38.

Originally from Blackhall Rocks, near Hartlepool, he discovered he had an aptitude for science and engineering at school. "I really enjoyed those subjects and I thought at the

time there were a lot more career opportunities in these areas."

He completed a chemical engineering degree at Cambridge University before heading back to the North-east in 2000 to join MPI in its previous format, when it was almost exclusively servicing the steel industry. Chris worked closely with Corus, which was bought by Tata Steel for £6.2bn in 2007 and MPI remained the R&D arm of the Indian-owned steel giant until it was taken back into independent ownership last year. Chris now plans to expand MPI's international footprint from Teesside, with the organisation having already worked on projects in China, India and North America.

It's a big task but one he's relishing - especially with help from the talented tech wizards who work for him.

"There are people here who are far better engineers and scientists than I am. I provide the direction and strategy but I'm fortunate to be surrounded by some excellent people."

Now he's praying his sentiments are shared by those in the corridors of Westminster.



# Tech centre creating two facilities for UK research

**By Jez Davison**

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A TECHNOLOGY centre aiming to become a UK hub for industrial materials research has revealed plans to create two new facilities.

The Materials Processing Institute (MPI) in Grangetown helps companies across a wide range of sectors to trial, develop and commercialise their technologies.

Now the organisation wants to beef up its offering with a training centre to upskill science and engineering PhD students and a tech facility to help SMEs commercialise their R&D.

The Centre for Doctoral Training will help PhD students from Durham, Sheffield and Newcastle universities to carry out industrial-focused research that could be used to test and commercialise new technolo-

gies and processes.

Funded by the universities and industry, it is expected to receive the first intake of students in October.

Meanwhile, MPI has applied for £3m from the Local Growth Fund to get the SME technology accelerator off the ground.

The facility will provide a tailored package of support for SMEs, including technical assistance to develop a product or process, access to R&D equipment and laboratory space, and general business advice. A decision on the LGF funding is expected within weeks.

Chris McDonald, CEO of MPI, said: "The technology accelerator will provide opportunities for SMEs to realise the commercial benefits of their technologies. It will support SMEs throughout the materials processing supply chain.

"The Centre for Doctoral Training will help students with

their PhDs but their research must have a strong industrial focus. It will provide a technical resource to industry and, at the same time, develop the next generation of scientists and engineers.

"There needs to be more entrepreneurship in the materials sector. The hope is that some of the students will start their own businesses after finishing their doctorates - and then they will be able to benefit from the SME technology accelerator."

The new facilities are the latest innovations at MPI, which is bidding to become a recognised Catapult Centre for UK industry. Catapults under Innovate UK - formerly the Government's Technology Strategy Board - are technology and innovation centres that allow UK businesses, scientists and engineers to work alongside each other on R&D activities.

Mr McDonald said having catapult status would make it

easier for MPI to attract funding and expand its international reach from Teesside. He is actively lobbying senior figures in Westminster, including business secretary Vince Cable and chief scientific adviser Sir Mark Walport, to make the case for MPI as a leading UK hub for industrial materials R&D.

However, the Government is unlikely to make a decision before the General Election.

Founded in 1945, MPI was the R&D arm of British Steel and then Tata before returning to independent ownership late last year. Previously it worked almost exclusively with the steel industry but has now broadened its services to other sectors, including firms working on graphene, nickel, glass and ceramics-based applications.

■ See tomorrow's Business supplement or visit [www.gazettelive.co.uk](http://www.gazettelive.co.uk) for an in-depth interview with Chris McDonald.



Chris McDonald, CEO of MPI