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Vision 2035: The need for Innovation to Meet Ambitious Targets set by the UK's New Critical Minerals Strategy

The Government has announced the UK's new Critical Minerals Strategy, which sets out an ambitious roadmap to secure essential mineral resources. The aim is to meet short term demand and support future development of key growth sectors for the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy. These sectors include Advanced Manufacturing, Clean Energy Industries, Digital and Technologies, Defence and Life Sciences. Main commitments include a boost to funding and energy costs relief, as well as streamlining of environmental permitting.

The Critical Minerals Strategy lays out concrete targets to produce 10% of UK's critical mineral needs domestically by 2035, and a further 20% through recycling. We can anticipate that a crop of innovative technologies will be developed to meet these targets, given the ever-increasing demand for mineral extraction and processing capabilities. Current activities are not sufficient.

The UK has a high level of innovation capability, and the Critical Minerals Strategy places great emphasis on leveraging this. The government aims to utilise the UK's strong R&D landscape, including world-class universities and academic centres of research on critical minerals, to propel innovation in technologies essential to Critical Minerals. These include chemistry, metallurgy, geology, midstream processing, recycling and mining engineering. Midstream processing and recycling expertise, in particular, are identified as well-established and growing capabilities of the UK.

What role can intellectual property (IP) play in supporting those working hard to reach the ambitions targets that have been set? The Critical Minerals Strategy does not explicitly comment on IP, despite the undeniable role it will play in the years to come, both home and abroad. Any emergent technology may well become essential to one or more critical minerals sectors, and therefore have worldwide application.

The patent system requires an owner to disclose their invention in return for the right to prevent others from making use of the invention for a predetermined period of time (typically 20 years). This enables collaborative IP partnerships to be developed, while safeguarding R&D investments and encouraging further innovation. This in contrast to trade secrets that, whilst in theory are perpetual, do not enable innovation based upon the published work of others. Savvy innovators will look to protect their new ideas with IP, likely via patents and/or trade secrets. Given the potential market for successful innovations, holders of IP rights could stand to reap substantial financial benefits and collaboration opportunities. The next decade is a prime opportunity to safeguard innovations via a strong IP strategy.

The Critical Minerals Strategy stresses the importance of international partnership and collaborations, due to the inherent international distribution of natural resources and locations of existing processing capabilities, whilst highlighting that attracting investment to the critical mineral sector can be difficult due to uncertainty introduced by volatile raw material trade prices. This inherent risk can be remedied to some extent by a robust IP portfolio, supported by a deliberate IP strategy. This is because a strong IP portfolio provides intangible assets that are a health and security indicator much sought after by both public and private investors.

A prudent approach to international collaboration and risk management must always include an awareness of IP rights. Protecting those rights gives the owner control over how they are used. Domestically-originating IP may require protection abroad, in strategic jurisdictions, to allow UK businesses to retain their competitive advantage and leverage when expanding or collaborating internationally. Companies in the sector should also be aware of the present IP landscape to ensure their activities do not infringe upon the rights of others. Licensing or other contractual agreements may be needed if a company does not have freedom to operate in light of IP held by other parties. Such awareness of the IP landscape may also help identify market gaps ready to be explored by R&D, secured by IP and, eventually, capitalised on in the market.

The UK's critical minerals strategy is a welcome recognition by the government of the role of innovation in the future of the critical minerals industry, to support the green transition, strengthen the UK's mineral supply chain and drive key growth sectors. A

thought-out IP strategy is a vital tool for businesses to demonstrate and safeguard their R&D and better reach their commercial potential.

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Further Reading

Department for Business and Trade. (2025). The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy. Policy Paper. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy

Department for Business and Trade. (2025). Vision 2035: Critical Minerals Strategy. Policy Paper. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-critical-minerals-strategy/vision-2035-critical-minerals-strategy

EIP Guide to IP for SMEs.