

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Taunton

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Taunton to Taunton DAB Limited.

In considering the applications it receives for small-scale radio multiplex licences, Ofcom is required to have regard to each of the statutory criteria set out in section 51(2) of the Broadcasting Act 1996 as modified by the Small-scale Radio Multiplex and Community Digital Radio Order 2019. These are as follows:

1. the extent of the coverage area (within the area or locality specified in the Ofcom notice inviting applications) proposed to be achieved by the applicant in the technical plan submitted in its application; (section 51(2)(a))
2. the ability of the applicant to establish the proposed service; (section 51(2)(c))
3. the desirability of awarding the licence to an applicant that:
 - a. is a person providing or proposing to provide a community digital sound programme service in that area or locality, or
 - b. has as a participant a person providing or proposing to provide a community digital sound programme service in that area or locality; (section 51(2)(ca))
4. the extent to which there is evidence that, amongst persons providing or proposing to provide community or local digital sound programme services in that area or locality, there is a demand for, or support for, the provision of the proposed service; (section 51(2)(f)) and
5. whether, in contracting or offering to contract with persons providing or proposing to provide community or local digital sound programme services, the applicant has acted in a manner calculated to ensure fair and effective competition in the provision of those services. (section 51(2)(g)).

The legislation does not rate these requirements in order of priority, but it may be that Ofcom will regard one or more of the criteria as being particularly important in view of the characteristics of the licence to be awarded and the applications for it.

Assessment

On 28 January 2025, Ofcom published a notice inviting applications for licences to provide small-scale radio multiplex services in localities including Taunton.

By the closing-date of 29 April 2025, Ofcom had received one application for Taunton. This was from Taunton DAB Limited ("Taunton DAB"). Copies of the non-confidential parts of the application were

made available for public scrutiny on the Ofcom website, and public comment was invited as required under section 50(7).

Ofcom colleagues assessed the detail of the application, including carrying out an assessment of the technical plan required to be submitted as part of all applications. The decision in relation to Taunton was made at an Ofcom decision meeting on 24 October 2025. The meeting carefully considered the application, public comment received, and professional advice from Ofcom colleagues involved in assessing the application. The statutory criteria were applied to reach a decision on whether to award a licence to the sole applicant. Reasons for the decision to award a licence to Taunton DAB are summarised below.

In relation to section 51(2)(a), the applicant proposed using one transmitter to provide its service. Ofcom calculations indicate that this would result in approximately 64% of the adult population in the advertised licence area being able to receive the service. Ofcom's coverage predictions indicated that the proposed small-scale radio multiplex service would be available to well under 40% of the population in the licensed area of the overlapping Somerset local radio multiplex, and that overspill outside the advertised area was predicted to be negligible. Ofcom therefore considered no mitigation was required to comply with overlap or overspill thresholds. Ofcom also considered no further mitigations were likely to be necessary to address hole punching or interference. Ofcom considered that coverage was reasonable and included robust coverage of the largest town of Taunton, although not of Wellington or Ilminster.

In relation to section 51(2)(c), Ofcom considered the applicant's financial and business plan, technical plan, the timetable for coverage roll-out, and evidence of relevant expertise and experience. In this context in particular, Ofcom also considered the public comment received which focused on the circumstances of the closure of Tone FM, an analogue community radio service run by Tone Community Media Group CIC, which had been awarded the licence for the Taunton small-scale multiplex in 2022 but was unable to launch within the 18-month statutory period. Ofcom noted there was some overlap in individuals connected with Taunton DAB and the former awardee. However, these were not of a nature that were likely to raise significant concerns over eligibility of the applicant to hold a licence. Further, the applicant had provided reasonable evidence in relation to funding and technical plans and had engaged a technical contractor with relevant experience in establishing small-scale multiplexes. The applicant had also proposed a one transmitter plan, limiting likely cost and complexity. Overall, Ofcom considered there was a reasonable prospect of the service being established within the 18-month period allowed by legislation.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), the applicant does not itself propose to provide a C-DSP service in the advertised area, nor does it have as a participant a person proposing to do so. Ofcom noted that involvement of such a person is a desirable feature but not a necessity for applicants.

In relation to section 51(2)(f), Ofcom considered evidence of demand or support from persons providing or proposing to provide community or local digital sound programme services (C-DSP and DSP services) in the advertised area. The applicant provided evidence of demand and support from one prospective C-DSP service (Apple FM, an existing analogue community radio service in Taunton), and from three other DSP services. Ofcom noted that this represented a modest level of demand and support, albeit the nature of the prospective C-DSP service was such that it had a good prospect of being available on the multiplex from launch. In view of the modest evidenced demand and support, Ofcom considered it would be important for the applicant to extend outreach between award and launch to support the longer-term viability of the multiplex and ensure efficient use of the spectrum allocated for it.

In relation to section 51(2)(g) and based on the evidence received, Ofcom was satisfied that the applicant had, in contracting or offering to contract with persons providing or proposing to provide community or local digital sound programme services, acted in a manner calculated to ensure fair and effective competition in the provision of those services. However, as noted above, the modest level of demand and support indicated limited outreach and it would be important to extend this between award and launch.

It is noted that the award of a licence does not confer on the awardee the right to implement all elements of the technical plan submitted to Ofcom as part of the successful application. Ofcom will treat proposals in that plan, on the basis of which the award was made, as things the successful applicant has committed to achieve within the 18-month period allowed between award and launch. However, for spectrum planning reasons, Ofcom may also require amendments to proposals between award and licence grant.

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