

Welsh Valleys small-scale radio multiplex award: cancellation and plans for re-advertisement

Background

Under section 51(6) of the Broadcasting Act 1996 (as modified by the Small-scale Radio Multiplex and Community Digital Radio Order 2019), Ofcom may cancel the award of a small-scale radio multiplex licence where the licence itself has not yet been granted and Ofcom has reasonable grounds for believing that the person to whom the licence was awarded will not provide the service within 18 months of the date of the award.

Decision

On 18 February 2021 Ofcom announced its decision to award a licence to provide a small-scale radio multiplex service in the Welsh Valleys area to GTFM (South Wales) Limited ('GTFM'). GTFM, which provides an analogue community radio service in the locality, had been the sole applicant for the licence.

In recent months, Ofcom has been in communication with GTFM regarding the prospect of providing the service within 18 months of award (i.e. by 18 August 2022). GTFM has confirmed that, despite its best efforts, it will not be able to launch with a technical plan reflecting the basis on which the licence was awarded, and it has asked Ofcom to cancel the award. In light of this, Ofcom considers the statutory criteria under section 51(6) are met, and the award has been cancelled.

Ofcom acknowledges that the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic have been particularly challenging for a small applicant reliant on external funding, particularly in the context of the Welsh Valleys, which has exceptionally difficult, mountainous terrain to cover. It is indicative of this that the original application needed to propose an eight transmitter solution even to cover 37% of the advertised area (far more transmitters than required in other localities, and for modest coverage in percentage terms). A statutory 18-month deadline exists for launch of small-scale multiplexes, but Ofcom acknowledges the genuine efforts made by GTFM in difficult circumstances.

Re-advertisement

GTFM has expressed its wish that a licence be re-advertised in the Welsh Valleys area. Ofcom considers the Welsh Valleys to be an area with strong potential for local and community radio services, and this was reflected in its inclusion in the first round of small-scale radio multiplex licensing. We therefore intend to re-advertise promptly.

However, in light of the technical coverage challenges noted above, we intend to reconsider the advertised area with a view to advertising a licence alongside Round Five¹ based around population centres in the western part of the area originally advertised.

¹ We have previously announced that Round Five will cover the South East England 'macro-area' due to spectrum constraints specific to that region, so this geographically distinct locality would be advertised alongside rather than as part of Round Five.