

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Bridgwater

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Bridgwater to Sedgemoor FM CIC.

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 Bridgwater.

By the closing-date of 29 April 2025, Ofcom had received two applications for Bridgwater. These were from Aspen Marketing Limited and Sedgemoor FM CIC ("Sedgemoor FM"). Copies of the non-

confidential parts of the applications were made available for public scrutiny on the Ofcom website, and public comment was invited as required under section 50(7) although none was received.

Ofcom colleagues assessed the detail of the applications, including carrying out an assessment of the technical plans required to be submitted as part of all applications. The decision in relation to Bridgwater was made by a panel of Ofcom decision makers which convened on 11 July 2025. They carefully considered the applications and professional advice from Ofcom colleagues. They applied the statutory criteria in reaching their decision on whether and to whom to award a licence. Reasons for their decision to award a licence to Sedgemoor FM 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 just under 44% 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 overspill outside the advertised area was predicted to be negligible and well under 30% of the population of the advertised area. Ofcom therefore considered no mitigations were required to comply with the overlap and overspill thresholds. However, Ofcom considered mitigation in the form of a power reduction was likely to be needed to address adjacent channel interference, and this would slightly reduce coverage to just under 41% of the adult population in the advertised area. Whilst modest as a percentage, decision makers noted the proposals were predicted to cover a population of around 50,000 with robust coverage in the town of Bridgwater itself, albeit not extending to the peripheries of the advertised area including Burnham-on-Sea.

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. Decision makers noted that the applicant is an established analogue community radio station in Bridgwater with a clear commitment to radio in the locality, and evidence had been provided in relation to funding and site access. The single transmitter plan, whilst providing only a moderate level of coverage as noted above, also limits the cost and complexity of establishing the service. Decision makers therefore considered there was a good prospect the service being established within the 18-month period allowed by legislation.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), as noted above the applicant itself intends to provide its existing analogue community radio service as a C-DSP service. Decision makers noted there was a very good prospect of this service being available on the multiplex at launch and this was viewed positively in the context of small-scale multiplexes providing a route to digital for such services.

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. In addition to its own service, applicant had provided evidence of interest from four other prospective C-DSPs, albeit some were existing services based outside the advertised area (which would require a studio in the area to obtain a C-DSP licence rather than a standard DSP licence). No expressions of interest were provided in relation to commercial DSP services. Decision makers noted this represented a modest level of demand and support, and it would be important for the applicant to seek to reach out to other services between award and launch in order to support the longer-term viability of the service.

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.

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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