

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Ringwood, Verwood & Fordingbridge

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Ringwood, Verwood & Fordingbridge to Forest Community Radio 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 Ringwood, Verwood & Fordingbridge.

By the closing-date of 29 April 2025, Ofcom had received one application for Ringwood, Verwood & Fordingbridge. This was from Forest Community Radio Limited (“FCR”). 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 Ringwood, Verwood & Fordingbridge was made by a panel of Ofcom decision makers which convened on 11 July 2025. They carefully considered the application, professional advice from Ofcom colleagues, and the public comment received. They applied the statutory criteria in reaching their decision on whether to award a licence to the sole applicant. Reasons for their decision to award a licence to FCR 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 over 47% 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 Bournemouth local radio multiplex, and overspill outside the advertised area was predicted to be 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 would be necessary to address severe hole punching into other multiplexes, and unfortunately the most practical mitigation of power reduction would materially impact on coverage, reducing it to approximately 17% of the adult population of the advertised area. Decision makers noted that predicted coverage was very low as a percentage of the advertised area and did not extend to several towns in the area including Ringwood and Fordingbridge. Whilst very low as a percentage, decision makers noted that a total adult population of around 12,000 would be receive coverage, with this coverage focused principally on the town of Verwood. On that basis, decision makers considered that, in the context of a simple single transmitter proposal, coverage was sufficient to justify award to the sole applicant.

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 whilst Ofcom’s assessment of coverage is based on reasonable mitigation at the site identified by the applicant, in this case the impact of mitigation was so significant the applicant itself may wish to reconsider site selection following award to achieve a viable level of coverage. In turn, this would impact on the business plan which is premised on use of a site owned by the applicant which kept costs at a modest level. Decision makers recognised that such replanning may make it more difficult to establish within the 18-month period allowed by legislation. However, the applicant is licensee of an analogue community radio service in Verwood and has a clear commitment to community radio in the area as further evidenced by interest in being carried on the multiplex from other local services. This contributed to the conclusion that, whilst challenging, there was sufficient prospect the service being established within the 18-month period allowed by legislation to justify award to the sole applicant.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), as noted above the applicant itself intends to provide a version of its existing analogue community radio service, Forest FM, 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. As well as the C-DSP service proposed by the applicant, four other prospective C-DSP services and four other DSP services had expressed an interest in carriage. Whilst the concerns around post-mitigation coverage noted above may affect interest in carriage, decision makers noted this represented a reasonably good level of demand and support in the context of a relatively small area, which may help the applicant overcome the acknowledged hurdles it faces in establishing 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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