

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Western Isles

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for the Western Isles to Craoladh Digiteach Ionadail 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 the Western Isles.

By the closing-date of 29 April 2025, Ofcom had received one application for the Western Isles. This was from Craoladh Digiteach Ionadail Limited ("CDI"). 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) although no comments were received.

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 the Western Isles was made at an Ofcom decision meeting on 12 September 2025. The meeting carefully considered the application 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 CDI 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 45% 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 no households in an overlapping local radio multiplex since none currently serves the locality, and would involve no overspill outside the advertised area. Ofcom therefore considered no mitigations were required to comply with overlap and overspill thresholds. Ofcom also considered that mitigations were unlikely to be necessary to address hole punching or interference. Given the population of the Western Isles is relatively low, 45% coverage equates to an adult population of only around 7,000 and Ofcom noted this represented a disappointing level with coverage not predicted to extend to the town of Stornoway. However, this was in the context of a large geographical area with challenges in achieving wider coverage with a single transmitter plan. Additionally, there was significant potential benefit for households covered given that the Western Isles are not within the coverage of a local radio multiplex and the multiplex would provide a good opportunity for a range of services to extend digital coverage to the locality. Ofcom therefore concluded coverage was sufficient to justify award to a 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. Ofcom noted that the likely cost of establishing the service combined with the relatively small population covered and limited evidence of interest of commercial services in carriage (see further below) meant there were concerns over ability to establish. However, the use of a single site limited complexity and the owner of the applicant had a longstanding involvement in radio in the locality and a clear enthusiasm for establishing a multiplex service on the Western Isles. In that context, Ofcom therefore concluded there was sufficient prospect of 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), the applicant itself proposes to provide four C-DSP services in the advertised area. Ofcom noted that none of these were existing community radio services, and there would be difficulties in making them available on the multiplex from launch given the concurrent challenges for the applicant in establishing the multiplex itself. However, the owner of the applicant has some experience in community radio and the proposal underlined the opportunities for the community sector potentially provided by a small-scale multiplex on the Western Isles, including for Gaelic language speakers.

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 had not provided evidence of demand and support from services in addition to those it had proposed to provide. Ofcom noted this represented a concern in relation to the longer term viability of the multiplex in addition, as noted above, for

establishment of the service. It would be imperative for the applicant to reach out to a wider range of services potentially interested in carriage between award and launch. However, particularly in light of the fact that the Western Isles are not within the coverage area of a local radio multiplex, meaning the small-scale multiplex would be a good opportunity for services wishing to cover the area, Ofcom considered it remained appropriate in this particular case to award a licence to the sole applicant notwithstanding the lack of evidence of demand and support.

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, Ofcom noted outreach appeared to have been limited and focussed on community groups with a Gaelic language focus on the Western Isles. Whilst there was no suggestion this was intended to exclude other potential services, as noted above it would be very important for CDI to broaden outreach following award.

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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