

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Weston-super-Mare

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Weston-super-Mare to North Somerset Digital 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 Weston-super-Mare.

By the closing-date of 29 April 2025, Ofcom had received one application for Weston-super-Mare. This was from North Somerset Digital Radio Limited ("NSDR"). 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 Weston-super-Mare was made at an Ofcom decision meeting on 12 September 2025. The meeting carefully considered the application, professional advice from Ofcom colleagues involved in assessing the application, and public comments received. 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 NSDR 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 81% 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 under 40% of the population in the licensed areas of the overlapping Somerset and Bristol & Bath local radio multiplexes, so Ofcom considered no mitigation was required to comply with the overlap threshold. However, overspill outside the advertised area was predicted to be materially above 30% of the population of the advertised area. Ofcom considered mitigation in the form of power reduction would adequately address the overspill issue whilst reducing coverage in the advertised area only slightly to approximately 80%. Ofcom considered no further mitigations were likely to be necessary to address hole punching or interference. Ofcom considered that, whilst coverage was unfortunately not predicted to extend to Uphill and Hutton, this represented a very good level of coverage within the advertised area as a whole.

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 use of a single, established transmitter site limited complexity and cost, and both the applicant and its chosen technical contractor had relevant experience. Ofcom therefore concluded there was a good prospect of the service being established within the 18-month period allowed by legislation.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), the sole shareholder in the applicant (North Somerset Local Media Limited) proposed to provide a C-DSP service, 100% Whatever Westcountry. Ofcom noted that this is an established analogue community radio service in the locality with a very good prospect of being available on the multiplex from launch.

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 in addition to that provided by the participant as noted above (Wave Community Radio, an existing online service) and from two prospective DSP services. Ofcom noted this represented a modest degree of demand and support and that it would be important to extend outreach between award and launch to secure the longer term viability of the service. Robust predicted coverage provided a good basis for the applicant to build on existing 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, as noted above, outreach

appeared based on expressions of interest to have been somewhat limited to date, and it would be important for NSDR to extend outreach 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.

September 2025