

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Worcester

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Worcester to Murfin Media (Digital) 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 Worcester.

By the closing-date of 29 April 2025, Ofcom had received one application for Worcester. This was from Murfin Media (Digital) Limited ("Murfin Media"). 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 Worcester 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 Murfin Media 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 74% 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 area of the overlapping Hereford & Worcester 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 hole punching issues. It was likely that power reductions would be sufficient to address those issues, and that this would reduce coverage to just under 64%. Ofcom noted that this represented a reasonable level of coverage sufficient to justify award to a single applicant. However, in the context of an advertised area with a single large population centre to cover, it was slightly disappointing that the submitted technical plan and that coverage was not predicted to be more robust within the city of Worcester.

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, notwithstanding some limitations in coverage and very limited evidence of demand and support (as noted below), the use of a single transmitter site limited likely cost and complexity. Additionally, the applicant had recent experience of establishing a small-scale multiplex in Ludlow, and had engaged an experienced technical contractor. Ofcom therefore concluded there was a reasonable prospect of the service being established within the 18-month period allowed by legislation.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), the applicant does not itself propose to provide a C-DSP service in the advertised area, nor does it have as a participant a person proposing to do so. Ofcom noted that involvement of such a person is a desirable feature but not a necessity for applicants.

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 just one prospective C-DSP service and no other prospective DSP services. Ofcom noted this represented a very low level of expressed demand in the context of an advertised area where there could reasonably be expected to be interest from prospective providers in the city of Worcester itself as well as heavily populated areas nearby. Ofcom noted it would be imperative for the applicant to extend outreach between award and launch to secure the longer term viability of the multiplex.

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 that outreach appeared to have been very limited, and this was also reflected in very low levels of carriage of programme services on the applicant's existing multiplex in Ludlow. This is a concern in the context of a multiplex service where the frequency allocated is intended to accommodate multiple services. Whilst there is no direct obligation on applicants or licensees actively to contact prospective services, all small-scale multiplexes have licence obligations requiring publication of a rate card for carriage and ensuring fair and effective competition in entering or offering to enter agreements with prospective service providers.

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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