

Statement on local television coverage area extension –

Middlesbrough

On 24 June 2022, Ofcom considered a request from Comux UK Limited (“Comux”) and Local TV Ltd (“Teesside TV”), the licensee for the local digital television service for Middlesbrough, to extend the Middlesbrough coverage area by deploying a wider antenna pattern whilst continuing to operate on an unchanged frequency channel. The proposal sought to enhance the existing coverage of the service into Darlington and surrounding areas to the west of the existing coverage.

Ofcom accepted there are likely to be some affinities between the existing coverage area and the proposed new area to be served given their close geographical proximity. The number of households able to receive the service would increase from 233,000 to 353,000. Ofcom does not consider that this would be a disproportionate increase compared to the original licensed area.

Ofcom considered that this would have a positive impact on the viability of both the local service and the local multiplex and noted that the extension would not result in any increase in overlap between the Middlesbrough local TV service and other local TV services. Further, both Comux and Teesside TV have agreed on how the enhancement will be funded, while the application was submitted jointly by both parties.

Ofcom considered that the requested coverage extension would not have affected its assessment at the time of the licence award. In particular, the licensee will provide a local service which includes content of relevance to viewers throughout the wider coverage area, and which will increase the range and number of services available to viewers in the extended coverage area. Ofcom was also satisfied that the requested extension would not impact on the ability of Teesside TV to deliver and maintain the Programming Commitments proposed in its application at the time of the licence award.

Taking these factors into account, Ofcom approved the proposed coverage extension request.

Next steps

Ofcom will vary the local multiplex and L-DTPS licences to include the revised technical parameters for the Middlesbrough coverage area and publish a variation note to this effect.

Ofcom has considered this request under our former policy (which was paused while Ofcom completed the 700MHz clearance programme) for dealing with requests for coverage enhancements to local TV services that was established in 2012. We have done so to expedite a decision and enable a modified antenna pattern to be incorporated in the design of the new transmitter mast that is being built to replace the one damaged by fire at Bilsdale in 2021. Incorporating the change at the design stage will enable the enhancement to be achieved at a greatly reduced cost compared with modifying the antenna at a later stage.

The Government has signalled through its White Paper¹ that it intends giving Ofcom the ability to renew the Local Television Multiplex licence, and renew or re-license the local TV services carried on the multiplex until 2034. We therefore consider it appropriate to review our coverage policy and provide clarity on the factors we take into account in relation to the local TV multiplex, Local Digital Television Programme Service licensees and other actual or potential users of UHF spectrum. We plan to consult on our coverage policy and expect the consultation will commence in the Autumn of 2022. We do not expect to make decisions on any further coverage changes to local TV services until that consultation process concludes in the Spring of 2023.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/up-next-the-governments-vision-for-the-broadcasting-sector/up-next-the-governments-vision-for-the-broadcasting-sector> see section 3.7 on Local TV