

## Small Scale DAB Trial Consultation

09th December 2014

Dear Sir / Ms,

I am writing to you in response to your consultation, as above, and, before dealing with the specific questions as set out in your consultation, I would like to make the following general points:

### **The Position of DAB Broadcasting**

At present DAB cannot be considered as a replacement technology for analogue (FM / AM) broadcasting. However, it could undoubtedly become a useful supplementary platform for community and other small-scale radio broadcasters, offering various enhancements over FM broadcasting and Internet streaming etc. On this basis, the proposed Ofcom trial of small-scale DAB multiplexes is to be welcomed as a first step towards the potential establishment of a new tier of more localised DAB multiplexes.

### **The Importance of Localism**

Any new tier of small-scale DAB multiplexes should not become "more of the same", rather it should be structured to reflect the importance of locally produced content and of content relevant to local audiences. Carriage of local community radio services and of small-scale commercial services not yet carried via DAB should be considered a priority.

### **Multiplex Ownership**

A major problem with the current structure of DAB broadcasting in the UK is the way in which the transmission of digital programme services has become the primary value extraction point within the digital broadcasting chain. If any proposed new tier of small-scale DAB multiplexes is to avoid simply adding to this status quo, limits on ownership need to be imposed to prevent existing players simply buying up these new licences to the detriment of local interests. In order to retain localised control over new small-scale DAB multiplexes limits on their ownership should be imposed. If the holding of small-scale DAB multiplex licences were to be limited to one per body corporate, this would prevent established providers for absorbing the new licences within their existing business model.

Collaborations between multiplex owning companies and minority shareholdings in other multiplexes should be permitted in order to achieve economies of scale etc., but ultimate control of each small-scale multiplex licence should rest with an independent body corporate, which has no controlling interest in any other DAB multiplex (of whatever scale). It should be noted that, since community radio licensing began in 2004, a similar approach has worked well in that area of broadcast radio licensing, maintaining the independence and local relevance of individual community radio licence holders.

### **Small-Scale DAB Licensing**

In future, the process through which small scale DAB licensing is carried out should prioritise the importance of local control and the carriage of local services. In the case of a "beauty contest" between applicants, the carriage of local community and commercial services should be a primary requirement.

### **Number of Experimental / Trial Licences (para. 1.1)**

Given the availability of funding provided by DCMS, Ofcom should consider operating more than three small-scale DAB trials. It is not clear how running only three trials would be able to provide Ofcom with the "**robust evidence**" (para. 1.15), necessary data and other information it will need to help it make a properly evidence-based decision about the future longer-term licensing of small-scale DAB services.

Dealing with the specific Consultation questions in order:

**Question 1:**

***Do you agree that we have identified the objectives which the small scale DAB multiplex trial should seek to achieve?***

Yes.

**Question 2:**

***Are there any other questions or issues which the small scale DAB multiplex trial should seek to address?***

In parallel with the technical experiment, Ofcom should also consider the importance of local content and the ownership of small-scale DAB multiplexes.

**Question 3:**

***Do you agree with our proposed technical licence conditions?***

**Use of Block 11A (Para. 2.44).** DAB frequency block 11A is allocated for use by the third national DAB multiplex, which means long-term use for local services is not viable. In order to avoid the necessity of listeners having to re-scan their receivers in future, where possible, Ofcom should allocate frequency blocks that it considers would be usable in the longer term for the area concerned.

**Use of Inter-leaved Allocations (Para. 2:45):** Although the "opportunity cost" of using interleaved spectrum might be considered low, there are issues to consider in terms of longer term spectral efficiency if multiple low-power allocations are to be made on these frequency blocks. In addition, as the number of low power interleaved services increases, this inevitably impacts on the ability to re-plan / adjust the pre-existing high power allocations on the frequencies concerned.

**Use of DAB Frequency Blocks below 10D:** It should be noted that, on various receivers, the use of frequency blocks below 10D required a full receiver re-scan. Such frequencies should therefore only be used where no suitable higher frequency block is available.

**Service Identifiers:** Successful applicants should provide a full list of individual services and potential services they may wish to carry as part of the trial, such that Ofcom can provide all necessary Service IDs from the outset. Such an approach avoids the need to re-scan certain DAB receivers before they can resolve newly added additional services.

**Question 4:**

***Do you agree with our approach to non-technical licence conditions and requirements?***

Please see response to Question 6 (below).

**Question 5:**

***Do you agree with our proposed approach to awarding trial licences?***

It is unlikely that all prospective applicants for involvement in the proposed small-scale DAB trial will have the technical capability to decide which type of transmission system is best suited to their geographical area and terrain. Instead of asking applicants to make this decision themselves, Ofcom should invite applicants to state a preference but making the final decisions itself.

**Question 6:**

***Do you agree with our proposals set out in this section in relation to final reporting obligations, the recovery of the equipment and the extension of trial licence duration?***

As per Sections 5.9 to 5.11 (inclusive), trial licences should include the provision for an extension of operations beyond nine months.

I hope the above is a useful contribution to your deliberations, please feel free to contact me if you require anything further.

**Yours faithfully,**

**Lawrie Hallett.**

==ENDS==