

Expanding access to shared spectrum

BT's response to Ofcom's further consultation issued on 24 July 2024

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BT Group



Executive summary

1. BT welcomes Ofcom's further proposals to update its Shared Access Licence framework that follow the other changes that Ofcom confirmed in its recent Statement.
2. BT notes that the shared access licence spectrum bands remain lightly used at present in most places. In so far as the latest proposals may improve the technical and commercial viability of the shared access framework, BT is supportive of the changes (subject to some detailed clarifications).
3. On the understanding that the removal of the requirement to record the number of mobile terminals used with outdoor low power licences in 3.8 – 4.2 GHz band will not preclude use by individual MNOs to improve coverage, as well as facilitating neutral host operators, we are supportive of the proposals. Some further clarification of this, in relation to each of the shared access bands, in the forthcoming statement or guidance notes would be helpful.
4. BT agrees with the proposals that would allow medium power use in urban areas along with balancing measures (i) in relation to Greater London; (ii) the 100MHz bandwidth limitations; and (iii) the doubling of the licence fee where medium power is deployed in urban areas.
5. In the longer term, depending on how demand evolves, it might be appropriate to reconsider whether some of the shared access spectrum would be more efficiently used if it is instead assigned for use by national mobile networks.

1 Introduction

BT welcomes this opportunity to provide its views on Ofcom's further proposals for the evolution of its Shared Access framework¹.

Our responses to the consultation questions are provided below.

2 Answers to consultation questions

Question 1: Do you have any comments on our proposal to make Medium Power licences (42 dBm EIRP, up to 10m height) commonly available in urban areas across most of the UK, for the 3.8-4.2 GHz and 1800 MHz bands?

The current process to allow medium power use in urban areas can take a long time, although in our experience, after detailed consideration of all relevant factors, and potentially with adjustments to the design, exceptions are usually able to be agreed.

We have previously expressed our reservations as to whether shared access licences represent the optimal and most efficient use of the entire 3.8 – 4.2 GHz band. We nevertheless support proposals that may improve the current low efficiency of the use of these spectrum bands.

The changes to the coordination process should enable many more deployments to be accommodated in these bands. It does therefore seem reasonable to relax the rules in relation to medium power deployments in urban areas. The proposal to routinely allow medium power licences in urban areas (at up to 10m height and only in areas outside London) would be helpful in terms of enabling some of the deployments that we anticipate our customers may require and we are therefore supportive of the proposal.

We continue to advocate a future review of the use of the 3.8 – 4.2 GHz band after further time to see how demand for shared access licences grows.

Question 2: Do you have any comments on our proposed balancing measures: i) to continue to only grant Medium Power licences in the Greater London area (as defined in our mm Wave work) by exception, applying the 'premises sterilisation' test? ii) to apply a 100 MHz limit to the amount of spectrum a licensee can transmit at Medium Power in a particular urban area? iii) to apply a new price as part of this liberalisation, set at £160 per 10 MHz for Medium Power licences in urban areas?

BT supports each of Ofcom's proposals for balancing measures that would be applied alongside the proposal to commonly allow medium power deployments in urban areas.

We agree that the Greater London area should have a different process applied. In terms of demand for shared access spectrum licences, it might be argued that some other dense urban areas could have equally high levels of demand, but we understand that the additional constraints of existing satellite and fixed links use are a factor that led Ofcom to only treat Greater London area in a different way to elsewhere.

We agree that limiting the bandwidth to 100MHz per licensee at medium power in urban areas and charging the higher fee for medium power use in those areas is a reasonable approach to promote efficient use of the spectrum.

¹ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/consultations/category-1-10-weeks/consultation-supporting-increased-use-of-shared-spectrum/associated-documents/statement-expanding-access-to-shared-spectrum.pdf?v=370918>

Question 3: Do you agree with our proposal to remove the TRR in relation to Low Power outdoor base stations in 3.8-4.2 GHz?

Following the current Ofcom Statement, indoor base stations no longer need to have the associated number of mobile terminals recorded. Ofcom indicates that this is to improve business cases by facilitating neutral host deployments.

At the same time we see that Ofcom's updated guidance note² includes the statement:

“3.8-4.2 GHz band: This spectrum should not be used as part of national mobile networks. Users looking to provide wide-area coverage should look for spectrum in other bands.”

We understand the use of the word “should” does not forbid such use and it would discourage rather than prevent it. If such use is not allowed the guidance should surely say that it “must” not be used.

That said, it is also confusing as to exactly what use it is that Ofcom actually wants to prevent, and what it will allow. We understand that when Ofcom says the use “should not be part of national mobile networks” it does not mean it can't be used to provide improved in building coverage for customers of a national MNO (or local low power capacity coverage outdoors if and when Ofcom extends the removal of the obligation to record the number of mobiles to low power outdoor as well as indoor base stations in the band).

Ofcom explains its objective of facilitating neutral host networks but is silent on whether use by MNOs for indoor coverage as part of the national mobile network is allowed in 3.8 – 4.2 GHz. We assume it is allowed and that Ofcom does not propose to discriminate between who can be licensed to use the frequencies, but it would be helpful to clarify this in Ofcom's next Statement. On this basis BT would support the proposed changes to the requirement to record the number of mobile terminals associated with a shared access licence base station.

We are also unclear as to whether, since for the 1800 MHz and 2300 MHz bands there is no obligation to record the number of terminals, Ofcom also intends that neutral host networks and individual MNO networks can use 1800 MHz and 2.3 GHz band frequencies for coverage and capacity provision for service to customers of the public mobile networks.

BT requests that these points are clarified in the Statement and/or the guidance notes.

Question 4: In relation to our impact assessment, do you agree with our assessment of the potential impact of the further proposals we are making?

Yes, we agree with Ofcom's impact assessment.

Question 5: In relation to our equality impact assessment, do you agree with our assessment of the potential impact of the further proposals we are making on specific groups of persons?

We agree that Ofcom's proposals would not affect any specific groups of persons differently to the general population.

Question 6: In relation to our Welsh Language impact assessment, do you agree with our assessment of the potential impact of our further proposals on the Welsh language? Do you think our further proposals could be formulated or revised to ensure, or increase, positive effects, or reduce/ eliminate any negative effects, on opportunities to use the Welsh language and treating the Welsh language no less favourably than English?

² <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/consultations/category-1-10-weeks/consultation-supporting-increased-use-of-shared-spectrum/associated-documents/shared-access-licence-guidance.pdf?v=370915>

We consider that the proposals have no bearing on the use of the Welsh language.

Question 7: Do you have any further comments on our proposals?

BT agrees with the proposals, but would ask that the guidance notes are clarified when updated to reflect Ofcom's eventual decisions the points we have raised about use of the shared access bands by neutral host networks and individual MNOs.

We also suggest that Ofcom keeps the use of the bands under review and considers further changes or alternative licensing regimes depending on how future demand and use of the shared access licence bands unfolds.




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