

Ofcom Advisory Committee for Wales
Response to Ofcom Consultation:
Request by Nation Radio (Ceredigion) for a Format Change
(Closing date for responses: 10 May 2019)

Introduction

The Advisory Committee for Wales welcomes the application by Nation Broadcasting Group to maintain a service that is similar in nature to the existing Radio Ceredigion service when the new licence commences on 1 June 2019. We note that the group had originally intended to replace the existing Radio Ceredigion service with a relay of the South Wales regional licence, Nation Radio. However, we believe that the interest of listeners in the Ceredigion area will be better served by a service which will include regular news bulletins and other information specifically about the area, rather than the more generic service that was originally proposed.

However, we note that the applicant has decided not include any Welsh language programming or other content within its format and revised character of service. This is disappointing, particularly given the linguistic make-up of the local community. But we note this group was the sole applicant and that Ofcom has no powers to mandate any specific content within radio formats. It is also worth noting that the licence area is very small and predominantly rural in character, serving around 72,000 adult listeners, making it a very challenging area to serve commercially. Commercial radio stations do not receive any public financial support and we recognise that the changes proposed by Nation Broadcasting to the Radio Ceredigion Licence should aid the financial sustainability of the service for the duration of the new licence.

Responses to the Consultation Question:

Question 1: Respondents are invited to comment on whether they agree with Ofcom's preliminary view and to frame their views and responses with reference to, or in the context of, the statutory criteria in section 106(1A) of the Broadcast Act 1990 (as amended).

Looking specifically at criterion (b) in section 106ZA of the 1990 Broadcasting Act, we agree with Ofcom's analysis that this format change would extend rather than narrow the range of programming available to listeners in the area. In particular, we note that the only other commercial radio broadcaster serving Ceredigion, Heart Mid and North Wales, already serves a wider geographical area and that maintaining the Radio Ceredigion service would provide a greater level of choice for listeners than simply relaying the Nation Radio service, which is currently available across most of south Wales.

The Radio Ceredigion service would continue to be delivered from Nation Broadcasting's base in St Hilary in the Vale of Glamorgan (along with the other stations in the group). The new licence will have a reduced requirement for locally made hours (down from 22 hours to 7 hours a day) and there will no longer be a requirement for a locally made breakfast show. In our previous consultation responses to the revised Ofcom localness guidance we argued that much of a station's character centres around its breakfast service as it is a time of the day with the highest number of listeners. We were therefore also very concerned when subsequently, following the enactment of the new guidelines, Global ended the Capital South Wales breakfast show and replaced it with show broadcast from London. In this context, a decision by Nation in the future to discontinue a dedicated breakfast show for Radio Ceredigion would be highly regrettable in our view.

However, taking account of the revised localness requirements we otherwise agree with Ofcom that despite the reduced level of locally made programming, there will be a requirement for the Radio Ceredigion service to provide local news and *“sufficient other local material to deliver the character of service, regardless of where the content is being broadcast from”*. We note that Radio Ceredigion would be able to share programming outside the locally made hours with any of the Groups’ other stations and that under the existing licence Radio Ceredigion already had the flexibility to broadcast the service from anywhere in Wales.

Welsh Language Programming

We recognise that the legislation does not enable Ofcom to mandate any specific content elements within a radio licence format (other than the provision of news and local information as set out in the localness guidelines). In our view this does reveal a significant deficiency in the legislation, which it is worth noting, is now over 29 years old and it is arguable that the social and political circumstances of Wales have changed significantly in the period since the legislation was enacted.

We note that in the existing format, the Character of Service requirement for the Radio Ceredigion service is for it to provide,

“A LOCAL NEWS, BROAD MUSIC AND INFORMATION SERVICE FOR CEREDIGION TARGETTING A BROAD 15+ AUDIENCE AND INCLUDING REGULAR AND IDENTIFIABLE WELSH LANGUAGE PROGRAMMING.”

However, the new character of service, following this latest revision will provide for:

“A MUSIC STATION FOR CEREDIGION FOR A BROAD AUDIENCE AGED 15+”.

According to the 2011 Census, 47.3% of the Ceredigion’s population can speak Welsh and we therefore regret the group’s decision to do away with the commitment to provide Welsh language programming. The Ofcom consultation notes that a community radio licence has been awarded to Radio Aber, but it also notes that the station will only cover *‘the northern part of the county of Ceredigion, meaning it will not reach population centres in the south of Ceredigion, such as Cardigan and Newcastle Emlyn’*. Radio Aber is not yet on air, but we note that in its application it described its intention to broadcast a mix of Welsh and English language content as follows,

“during the day the station will broadcast music from across the decades - both in English and in Welsh - mixed with interesting speech and conversations with local people”.

We accept that in the case of Radio Ceredigion, Ofcom cannot legally require the service to include any Welsh language programming. However, given the significant presence of Welsh speakers across the general listening audience, we would hope that the operators of the Radio Ceredigion service would continue to take this factor into account and possibly include some Welsh language content even though it would not be a requirement to do so. Given the area’s local demographics, the provision of some Welsh language content, if properly managed, could continue to deliver significant public value to the Radio Ceredigion audience in our view.