

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Paisley & West Glasgow

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Paisley & West Glasgow to Ross Inc 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 19 April 2024, Ofcom published a notice inviting applications for licences to provide small-scale radio multiplex services in localities including Paisley & West Glasgow.

By the closing-date of 18 July 2024, Ofcom had received one application for Paisley & West Glasgow. This was from Ross Inc Limited ("Ross Inc"). 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 none was 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 Paisley & West Glasgow was made by a panel of Ofcom decision makers which convened on 7 February 2025. They carefully considered the application and professional advice from Ofcom colleagues. They applied the statutory criteria in reaching their decision on whether to award a licence to the sole applicant. Reasons for their decision to award a licence to Ross Inc 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 over 80% 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 well under 40% of the population in the licensed areas of the overlapping Glasgow and Central Scotland local radio multiplexes, and overspill outside the advertised area was predicted to be under 30% of the population of the advertised area. Ofcom therefore considered no mitigations were required to comply with these thresholds. Ofcom also considered that mitigations were unlikely to be necessary to address hole punching or interference. Decision makers noted that predicted coverage was very good, with the single transmitter site well chosen to secure coverage of the highest population areas including Dumbarton, Clydebank, Paisley, Bearsden and Johnstone, albeit with patchier coverage towards the southern part of the advertised area.

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. Decision makers noted that Ross Inc proposed a single transmitter which is already in use by an analogue community radio station, Quality Radio (which is not a shareholder in the applicant but is associated via a director, Norman Ross, who is sole director and 50% owner of Ross Inc). This meant the technical plan involved relatively limited cost and complexity. Overall, decision makers considered there was a good prospect of Ross Inc establishing the service within the 18-month period allowed by legislation.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), neither the applicant itself nor either of its participants is proposing to provide a C-DSP service on the multiplex. Under the legislation, involvement of such a person is a desirable feature but not a necessity for applicants (n.b. the overlap in directorships with Quality Radio as noted above does not constitute participation for these purposes).

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. Four prospective C-DSP services (including Quality Radio) and three other DSP services had expressed an interest. Decision makers noted the extent of demonstrated demand and support was somewhat disappointing, with limited evidence of outreach to a wide range of commercial and community services in the context of a locality with a significant population, and a reservation of capacity for at least seven C-DSP services. The merits of the technical plan in providing good coverage of key population centres, and involvement of the sole director in community radio in the area, provided a good basis for building support between award and launch of the service. However, decision makers noted significant work would be needed in this area 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, as noted above, decision makers considered evidence of outreach to date was limited, and it would be important for the applicant to focus on this area between award and launch of the multiplex.

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.

February 2025