

The Highways Agency (HA) response to the consultation question proposed in OFCOM's 'Radio - Licensing Policy for VHF Band III, Sub-band 3'.

Background (relevance of the Highways Agency response)

The Highways Agency key business objectives are to: deliver a high quality service to our customers by a programme of improvements to the strategic road network; improved management of incidents and road works, and; influencing travel behaviour through better information to inform journey choices.

Our work in meeting the latter of strategic business aims has expanded into a review of available broadcast platforms, outlining the effectiveness of each for potentially reducing congestion, improving road safety and increased customer satisfaction.

This work began as a study into the possibility of setting up low power FM transmissions equipment, which could locally warn motorists approaching potentially dangerous changes to the road conditions (for example a lane closure). This investigation soon grew to an investigation of all possible ways the Highways Agency could better disseminate their wealth of information about road network conditions to assist motorists during their trip. Unlike previous unsuccessful traffic information services (e.g. Gatwick Radio), the Highways Agency is considering free-to-air public services which are not intended (initially) to become commercial broadcasts.

As a first step into "broadcasting" the Highways Agency has set-up an Internet Radio service <http://www.trafficradio.org.uk/map.htm> (Note this is a pilot service currently being trialed and is not publicised for public consumption), which streams spoken Highways Agency traffic information recorded, updated and sent by partner TrafficLink every 20-30 minutes. In addition to this, the Highways Agency is currently investigating the set-up of pilot local FM and AM services providing dedicated traffic information to motorists travelling on chosen parts of the road network.

With the rising take-up of DAB as an in-car platform, the Highways Agency is keen to ensure that users and drivers alike have access to localised and relevant traffic information via their Digital Radios.

Consultation Response

As a potential user of the newly available spectrum, the Highways Agency agrees with the OFCOM proposal for spectrum allocation.

The Highways Agency remit to provide spoken traffic and travel information to motorists relies on effective delivery through radio channels for which there is large client availability. It is important to the Highways Agency that Digital Radio becomes a ubiquitous delivery medium and that motorists have access to Digital Radio products to obtain their traffic and travel information.

The OFCOM proposal to licence additional local multiplexes is especially welcomed by the Highways Agency. Coverage of new geographical areas would open up even more opportunities to broadcast localised spoken traffic information.

The Highways Agency also welcomes the OFCOM proposal to licence an additional national multiplex. With no bandwidth available on current national multiplexes, implementation of a new national service would provide the Highways Agency with an opportunity to negotiate for a national service. In addition to spoken information, a national service would be able to incorporate multimedia applications.

Using DAB the public could get accurate, real-time traffic and weather information direct from the Highways Agency across England's 5,000 miles of motorways and trunk roads. DAB also could be used to encourage road users to prepare for severe weather and give advice to motorists driving in or stranded in severe weather. This will help the government improve journey reliability and road safety for everybody in the worst travel conditions.