

RESTRICTED SERVICE LICENCES (RSLs)

ANNUAL REPORT 1998

Introduction

- 344 short-term RSL services were licensed in 1998. For the first time there has been a (small) drop in the number of licences issued. However, there was a 15% increase in the number of applications received in 1998 compared to 1997.
- The number of services licensed for events and other special projects has increased from 229 (66% of the total) in 1997 to 278 (81% of the total) in 1998. The number of 'trial' services dropped from 121 (34% of the total) in 1997, to 66 (19% of the total) in 1998.
- There has been an increase in requests for RSLs for sports coverage, training, student services and for religious purposes.
- More groups are requesting shorter licences. The number of services broadcasting for up to 2 weeks has nearly doubled (70 in 1997; 132 in 1998). (Since the introduction of a 'daily rate' licence fee in September 1997, groups choosing to broadcast for a shorter period benefit from a lower fee).
- The availability of suitable FM frequencies continues to be a problem in some parts of the country. In Greater London some 'rationing' has been introduced, with no trials allowed and a limit of one RSL per group a year.
- The Radio Authority has been issuing RSLs since its inception in 1991. The Authority's rules and the conditions that must be met before a licence is issued are contained in 'RSLs: Notes for Applicants'. Licences are usually issued for a maximum of twenty-eight days, and for a limited coverage area (a town or part of a city).

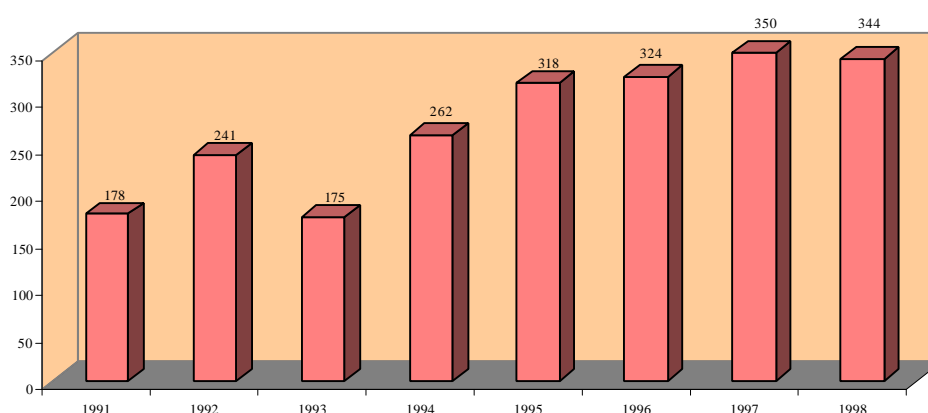
A full list of short-term RSLs issued in 1998, which includes information on licensees and their waveband, purpose/event, location, date, duration and callsign is available on request from: Press & Information Office, The Radio Authority, Holbrook House, 14 Great Queen Street, Holborn, London WC2B 5DG.

Licences issued

1. In total, up to the end of 1998, we have licensed 2,205 services under the RSL scheme since we began issuing them in 1991. 344 licences were issued in 1998, and this represents a slight decrease (-1.7%) on the total for 1997 of 350. This is the first year we have experienced any reduction in the number of RSLs licensed. The reason for this is because we took the administrative decision to issue only two licences for the Welsh stages of the RAC Rally when fifteen applications were received and processed (see paragraph 15 below).

2. A map showing the RSL activity by county throughout the UK is attached to this report. The table below shows the number of licences issued each year.

RSLs licensed between 1991 and 1998



*Figures for 1991 and 1992 include the Radio Cracker project. Ninety Cracker RSLs were licensed in 1991 and eighty-three in 1992.

3. 462 applications were received in 1998 (this figure includes 26 Millennium projects and ten applications for Ramadan commencing in December 1999). This is a 15% increase on the 1997 total of 401. All applications received are logged-in, and subsequently a small number are refused by us, or withdrawn by the applicant, prior to issue. In 1998, 55 applications were refused or withdrawn (12% of the total number of applications received). Of these, 15 were withdrawn by the applicant, the most common reason being that they have been unable to raise enough money to fund the broadcast, although three groups experienced problems with their studios.

4. The remaining 40 applications were turned down by staff for a variety of reasons, including:

- the applicant was involved with a local licence applicant in the area or nearby (eleven were rejected for this reason);
- an application had already been accepted from another group for coverage of the same event;

- the dates were not available as another RSL had already been accepted in the same area;
- there was no suitable FM frequency available (applicants are rarely willing to accept AM instead);
- the application was received too late to process (we need at least six weeks' notice);
- the RSL was to be used to promote a product (we are unwilling to licence services which “merely promote a commercial product or service” – ‘RSLs: Notes for Applicants’ paragraph 1.);
- the applicant had already run one RSL in London and a second application was rejected as our rules now limit groups to one RSL per year in Greater London; and
- four trial services were proposed in London where we no longer license trial services.

Reasons for granting a licence

5. We categorise RSLs as either ‘trials’ or ‘special events’, with the majority falling into the special event category. In 1998, 19% (66) were trials and 81% (278) were classified as being for events and other special projects. This represents quite a change from previous years when the ratio has been roughly one-third trials, to two-thirds events. While the total number of licences issued has changed little, there has been a large decline in the number of trials and a corresponding increase in RSLs for events and special projects (see paragraphs 8 & 9).

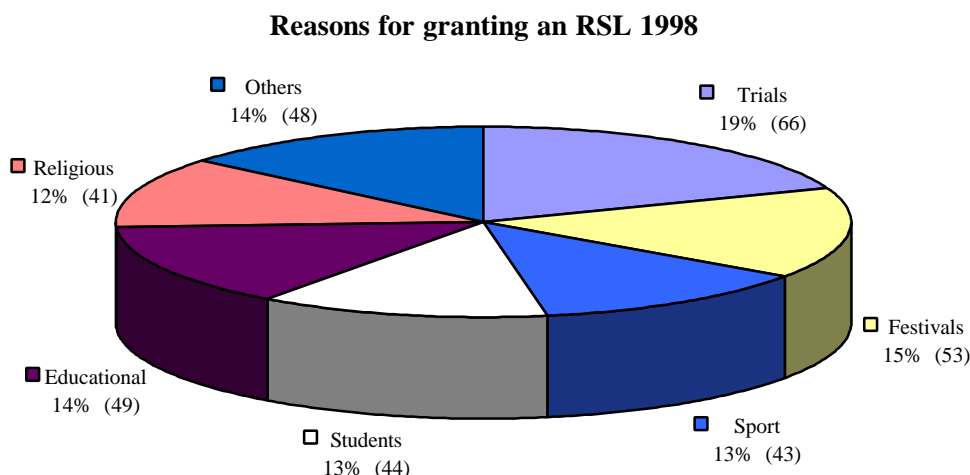
Trial services

6. Trial RSL activity is taken into account, along with other factors, when Authority Members draw up a ‘working list’ of areas where they intend to advertise full local licences. The decline in trials may be an indicator that the Authority has succeeded in satisfying the demand from applicant groups in many places by adding those areas of high RSL activity to the local licence working list.

7. In January 1998, we announced that we would not grant trial RSLs in Greater London. There were two reasons for this. First, after the advertisement of a permanent licence for North/North West London we do not have suitable FM frequencies available elsewhere in London to advertise any more local licences for the foreseeable future. We do not wish to unfairly raise the expectations of applicant groups or listeners in other areas by licensing further trial services. Second, due to the shortage of suitable FM frequencies, we are not able to satisfy the high demand for RSLs in London and rejecting trials is one way of ‘rationing’ these licences (see also paragraph 21).

Events and other special projects

8. A general indication of the most popular reasons for running an RSL is useful and is summarised on the pie chart below. However, it should be borne in mind that some RSLs serve more than one purpose and so are difficult to categorise (e.g. event coverage and trial).

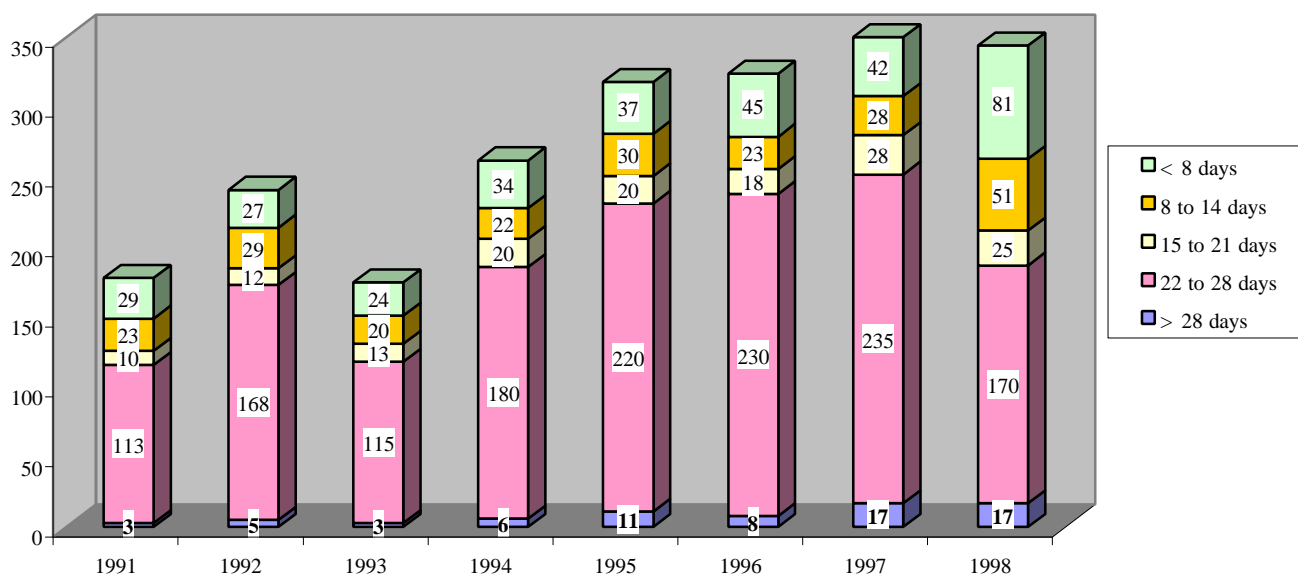


9. 'Festivals' includes various local arts and music festivals, carnivals and air shows. The proportion of licences issued for festivals has remained the same compared with 1997. The number of RSLs covering sporting events has gone up from 11% to 13%; educational projects and training from 11% to 14%; RSLs for religious purposes from 8% to 12%; and student services (e.g. for freshers or rag week) from 9% to 13%. The proportion of RSLs falling under the heading 'others' remained the same as in 1997, at 14%.

Duration of RSLs

10. It would appear that the increase in RSLs for 'special events' may be due to the introduction of a 'daily rate' tariff in September 1997. This enables any group that wishes to run a short project, or wants to cut costs on their RSL, to broadcast for a shorter period of time for a lower fee. Prior to this date a flat rate was charged which varied according to waveband and power level, but was the same whether a group broadcast for one day or 28.

Duration of licences 1991-1998



11. The proportion of licences requested for 22 to 28 days has dropped from 67% in 1997 to 49% in 1998. 46% of licences issued in 1998 were for between one and 21 days duration; as opposed to 28% of the total in 1997. Requests for licences for between one and 14 days has grown quite dramatically. The proportion of licences for up to one week in duration has doubled from 12% in 1997 to 24% of the total in 1998. Similarly, licences for between eight and 14 days have risen from 8% of the total in 1997 to 15% in 1998. The least popular duration is for between 15 and 21 days. Only 25 services (7% of the total) requested this duration.

12. The great majority of trial services (88%) broadcast for 28 days (or more). These included two, in sparsely populated areas where there is no existing ILR service, which were exceptionally allowed to broadcast for more than 28 days. These were Argyll FM in Campbeltown on Kintyre (39 days), and Cuillins FM in Portree on Skye (62 days).

13. 81% of the student services were for between 22 and 28 days. (The Student Radio Awards named Storm FM the Best Student Radio Station for 1998. They were on-air with a 28 day RSL in Manchester in February.) 59% of RSLs issued for religious purposes were for 28 days or more, including 13 for Ramadan and Eid, exceptionally licensed for the 32 day period of religious observance and celebration. However, 17 were for shorter periods, including eight RSLs of four days each for the annual convention of Jehovah's Witnesses at various locations around the country.

14. The categories with the highest number of short broadcasts are for sports, educational projects, festivals and 'others'. Just over half of the RSLs issued for coverage of sports events were for fewer than ten days. They included, for instance, coverage of rugby matches, horse racing, horse trials, golf, sailing and car rallies. 15 (35%) were for 28 days (or more) at football clubs and motor racing circuits. We are

sometimes able to agree to the usual limit of 28 days being exceeded if the sporting calendar or fixture list of the club or circuit merits it.

15. As referred to in paragraph 1. above, we agreed to accept 15 applications for locations just a few miles apart for covering the RAC rally in Mid Glamorgan and the Brecon Beacons. The two stages of the rally were held on 23 and 24 November and one licence was issued for each day covering eight and seven different transmitter sites respectively. The programming was a similar mix of commentary and information for a few hours at each site, and the service would cease at one site as the rally moved on to the next stage, and commence at the next transmitter location. The same frequency was used at each place. (Two Radio Authority licences were issued, one for each day. A separate WT Act licence was issued for each transmitter site.)

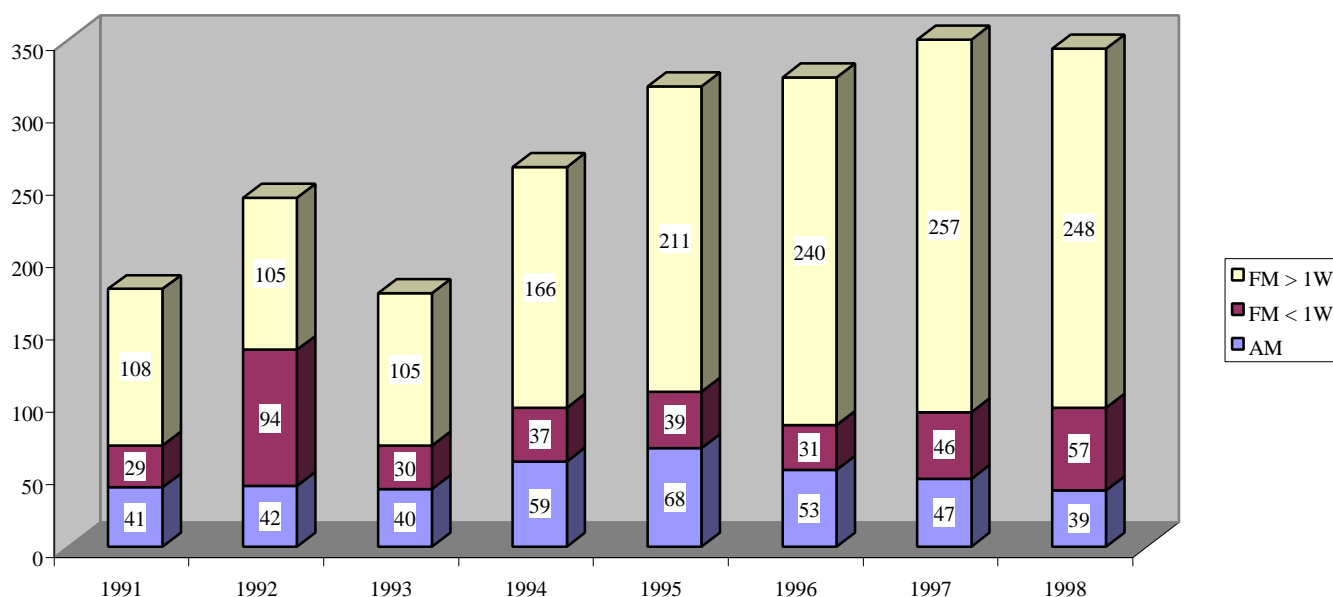
16. RSLs for training purposes and educational projects included school projects and college training courses as well as less formal educational initiatives run by community radio or youth groups. 45% of these RSLs were for periods of up to 14 days, for example Radio XL from Beal High School in Ilford, Essex, broadcast for five days in July. The proportion of short festival broadcasts was even higher. 62% were for up to two weeks in duration, including, for instance, Radio Carrickfergus which broadcast coverage of the Carrickfergus Waterfront Festival in County Antrim, over a 14 day period in June.

17. As implied by the heading 'others', this category includes a mixed bag of projects which vary from year to year. A number of drive-in movies usually feature in this category, and this year 11 such services were licensed, typically for two days each. Also included were various youth and community projects, charity fundraisers, hospital radio services, and shopping centre information services. Altogether 63% of these RSLs were on-air for up to 14 days.

18. Two proposals were taken directly to Authority Members for approval during 1998. March FM covered the Countryside Alliance March in London, and Chain FM broadcast during the Jubilee 2000 Coalition demonstration at the G8 summit in Birmingham. Both were proposed by the organisers of the respective events to provide relevant information to participants, and some discussion of the issues. Both events were staged in an attempt to lobby government on a political issue, and Authority Members agreed to grant both licences on the understanding that all output would count as 'news' and therefore must be duly accurate and impartial. Both broadcasts were apparently successful in providing the opportunity to keep the organisers, participants, emergency services and general public informed on the days' events (although March FM suffered from some interference, reportedly organised by a group of anti-March protestors).

Technical matters

Waveband and power levels



19. The table above shows the number of licences issued in each band, over the past eight years. Of the 344 licences issued in 1998, 305 (89%) were on FM and 39 (11%) were on AM. In 1997 the split was 87:13. Two different bands of power are available on FM. Demand for the higher power levels on FM has dropped slightly, year on year. At the same time requests for RSLs at a maximum power of 1Watt on FM have increased by 4% over the previous year (from 46 in 1997 to 57 in 1998). This is probably explained by the shift in demand away from trials and towards event-based services. Trial broadcasters usually want to cover as wide an area as possible and will request the highest power level allowed. Whereas services for events or other special projects may only wish to cover the site of the event. Some broadcasts, such as educational or youth projects, may be planned for the benefit of the participants more than the listener, and so a lower power level (and lower licence fee) may be acceptable to them.

20. All frequency planning and allocation work for RSLs is now done by the Authority. Wireless Telegraphy Act licences are issued on behalf of the Radio-communications Agency at the Department of Trade and Industry. We took over these responsibilities from the Agency in September 1997. We continue to have a good working relationship with the Agency, and liaise regularly with the frequency clearance committee secretary, and with the Radio Investigation Service (about interference problems and pirate radio matters).

Frequency availability

21. The availability of suitable FM frequencies is a problem in some parts of the country, particularly at times of high demand (for instance, in November/December). During 1998 staff have had to turn down a number of RSL applicants in Greater London because there are no longer enough frequencies available to meet the demand. As noted in paragraph 7. we are not willing to license trial services in London. In July Authority Members agreed to a further restriction on RSLs in London, that only one RSL per group a year may be granted in Greater London (the usual limit elsewhere is two). It was felt that it was unfair to turn some London groups away while others might get the opportunity to broadcast twice, either by getting their application in first, or by avoiding times of high demand. Some objections to the new restrictions were raised, but it was felt that no exceptions should be made. If we are not able to find an FM frequency for an applicant, we usually offer AM as an alternative. RSL broadcasters generally seem reluctant to use AM, and prefer to reschedule a broadcast to a time when an FM frequency is available, or not to go ahead at all.

22. Despite these restrictions, demand for RSLs in Greater London continues to outstrip the supply of suitable FM frequencies. The local radio service, FLR, was launched on 107.3 MHz in Lewisham in February 1999, and next year (2000) will see the introduction of a North/North West London service on 107.1 MHz. Both frequencies have been used for RSLs. 87.7 MHz is reserved for RSL use and so will continue to be available. In the meantime, we are undertaking a series of frequency reviews to identify suitable FM frequencies for RSLs in areas of high demand around the country.

Licence fees

23. The current level of application and licence fees were set in September 1997. A fee of £200 is required on application, and licence fees are charged at a daily rate (£28 per day for 1 Watt on AM; £49 a day for 1 Watt on FM; £80 a day for up to 25 Watts on FM). Roughly half the total licence fees collected are passed to the Radio-communications Agency.

24. In January 1998 we introduced an 'amendment fee' of £200. After staff have agreed to grant an RSL and confirmed this in writing, any requests to amend applications may incur an amendment fee. This charge was introduced to cover the cost of re-clearances and associated administration. It includes proposed changes to transmission site, broadcast dates or, under some circumstances, callsign. Minor changes and additions to proposed programming and hours of broadcast do not incur a fee.

RSLs to mark the Millennium

25. In July Authority Members agreed to the unusual step of inviting applications for RSLs planned to mark the Millennium for consideration outside normal RSL procedures, and in advance of the usual earliest acceptable date for applications (normally a maximum of one year before requested commencement date). Our aim was to grant as many requests as possible (frequency availability permitting) regardless of whether groups were planning to serve the same area. A deadline of 31 October 1998 was set for receipt of applications. We have agreed to grant licences to 25 groups. A press release was issued on 19 February 1999.

Other RSL activity in 1999

26. In spite of the comparative flattening in the level of demand for RSLs in 1998, we have recently received a record number of applications. In January and February 1999 we received a total of 112 applications. (During the same period in 1998 we received 85). There will always be variations in demand for different reasons. For example, in December 1998 and January 1999 we have received a total of twenty-four applications for Ramadan (commencing in December 1999). Many London groups are also applying early because of the shortage of FM frequencies.

27. There has been a fair amount of interest in the solar eclipse, which will occur at 11am on 11 August 1999. There will be a total eclipse in Cornwall, and we are processing four applications in the area. We would also expect to receive more applications to cover Millennium celebrations. Some groups have indicated they have not been able to apply before now as local celebrations have yet to be finalised in their area.

Long-term restricted service licences

28. At the Radio Festival in July 1998, the Authority announced that it would be making a new type of long-term restricted service licence available on low powered AM (LPAM). This announcement followed a successful pilot scheme, set up by the Authority, in which four radio stations, each serving a non-commercial establishment occupying a single site, were chosen to establish that this arrangement would not impact on the wider local broadcasting market. All four stations, Jam 1575 serving the Universities of Hull and Humberside, URE serving the University of Essex, Radio Tyneside serving the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Stoke Mandeville Hospital Radio in Aylesbury, have now been issued with full five-year licences. The Authority began receiving applications for new LPAM services in January 1999.

29. There were 57 stations operating on long-term restricted service licences (LRSLs) during 1998. In addition to the four services which took part in the LPAM scheme, forty-four stations hold AM induction loop LRSLs, and nine broadcast using

low powered FM LRSLs, which are available in pre-defined, sparsely populated areas of England, Wales and Scotland. Only one new LRSL was issued in 1998 (apart from the LPAMs mentioned above), to Hospital Radio Withybush serving Withybush Hospital in Haverfordwest. LRSLs are mostly held by stations serving hospitals (31) and universities (23), but the Authority also licenses stations serving Colchester Sixth Form College, and Moreton Hall School in Oswestry.

Digital restricted service licences

30. Experiments with digital radio continued throughout the year, with a total of 25 digital RSLs issued. NTL and Classic FM each continued their experimental multiplexes in London on a rolling 28 day basis through the year. The Authority had decided that, in order to avoid any possible impact on the award of local multiplex licences, these experiments should cease at the end of 1998, and NTL and Classic FM were not invited to renew those licences. However, in February 1999, in response to interest within the radio industry, we announced that we would allow digital trial radio broadcasts to resume under the RSL scheme. The Authority is satisfied that the temporary suspension for digital services of the rules which restrict RSLs will not jeopardise the integrity of the digital licensing procedure at this early and formative stage for digital radio. In July, two digital RSLs were issued, one to NTL for 21 days, and one to Castle Transmission International for four days, to cover the Radio Academy Festival in Birmingham.

Conclusion

31. 1998 has been a year of change for RSLs. Although there was a slight drop in the number of licences issued compared with 1997, the number of applications received has increased. There was a dramatic drop in demand for RSLs from groups wishing to run trial services and a corresponding increase for services for coverage of events and other special projects. More groups requested shorter licences and took advantage of the change in our fee structure from a flat 28 day fee, to a daily rate. The new tariff was introduced with the aim of enabling more very short-term projects and groups with a small budget to broadcast. Members and staff are pleased to see that this appears to have become a reality.

Susan Williams
May 1999

