

About radio formats

A Format document sets out the type of broadcast output that each commercial radio station is required to deliver. It encapsulates the character of the service a station is obliged to deliver as a condition of its licence.

This document provides a general explanation of what Formats mean, and especially what they mean in light of their simplification following Ofcom's Future of Radio projects in 2007 and 2008.

Background

As a result of our Future of Radio work, most local commercial radio stations had their Formats simplified.

Previously, Formats contained a headline or essential character of service, followed by a number of points of detail a station had to comply with to deliver that Format. Most have now had that detail removed.

Stations still have to comply with the same headline or essential character of service: that substantive obligation did not change and has not changed. But, they do not necessarily have to do all the specific things the previous detail required. The way Ofcom measures compliance with the character of service contained in the Format has changed.

What this means is explained in more detail below.

Future of Radio

We first proposed the simplification of Formats in the Future of Radio consultation in April 2007⁽⁻¹⁻⁾. We said, " *Effectively this proposal would see the Character of Service retained but all of the detail would be removed.*"

In the Future of Radio Further Consultation and Statement in November 2007⁽⁻²⁻⁾ we decided:

Analogue local commercial radio station Formats will be streamlined to bring them into line with the level of detail in DAB Formats. In most cases this will mean the programming detail in the Format will be removed but the Character of Service will remain.

We implemented this decision in February 2008, on publication of the further Future of Radio statement that month⁽⁻³⁻⁾. At that time, we wrote to all licensees regarding the simplification of their Formats. The letters set out the basis for the simplified Formats and the approach Ofcom would take to regulating them, and licensees were asked to agree to the change. The new simplified Formats came into effect for all licensees who agreed to them.

What the simplified Format means

There are two key elements to the simplification of Formats described above.

First, as we said in the November 2007 Future of Radio document, the change " *would remove more detailed requirements*" from Formats.

This was on the basis those requirements, " *are unnecessary to maintain the overall character of each radio station.*" Whilst the requirements were binding on licensees, they were only ever subsidiary to the headline essential character of service a station had to deliver: a means of making sure it was delivered.

Second, accordingly, and as we also said in the same document, the change, " *would still preserve the overall character of each station* ,"and, " *the headline character of service would remain unchanged.*"

This means that a licensee whose Format has been simplified, by the removal of the detailed requirements, still has to provide a service whose overall, headline or essential character is the same as it was before simplification.

This is why we also said in November 2007, " *In no case would this [change] result in new obligations for the licensee.*" The licensee's essential obligation has not changed: if it was an adult contemporary music service before, it still is. The same applies to any other service.

We re-iterated this in the letter of February 2008 to licensees:

"The attached proposed Formats have been drawn up in such a way as to ensure that each station still retains its fundamental present sound."

Those stations who agreed to change their Formats, to the new simplified version, in response to that letter, agreed to this.

What did change

Whilst a licensee's substantial obligation to deliver the same essential character of service did not and has not changed, what did change is the following.

The detail removed from Formats was binding. It was what a licensee had to do to deliver his essential or headline character of service. But, as noted above, it was only ever subsidiary to that character of service. One way of looking at the detail is that it was the way Ofcom would measure compliance with that character.

Now, and since February 2008, as long as a licensee delivers a service that has the required essential or headline character, it does not necessarily have to do all the specific things its previously detailed Format required. So, a way of looking at this is that what did change is the way Ofcom will measure compliance with the Format.

The way we put this in the February 2008 letter to licensees was:

" Given the cut in the amount of detail within each Format, it should be emphasised that the "spirit" of the Format will be firmly regulated, and our regulation will continue to have sampling at its core. Stations will still be monitored to make sure they comply with each Format. So while the new style Formats do not include quotas for example requiring a given percentage of music from a certain era we will apply a common sense approach to enforcing them should there be any disputes. If, for instance, a stations Format requires it to be mainly classic pop, we would not accept that 51% classic pop and 49% heavy metal was a sensible interpretation of the Formats spirit."

What is key is that a licensee delivers a service that has the essential character required by its headline character of service. We consider this by reference to the "spirit" of the simplified Format, as set out above, and using a common-sense approach. We also use broad parameters as to, for example, the type and age of music played, as a general guide to, rather than as a binding requirement of, compliance with the essential character.

To illustrate this, some Formats require that a licensee play "*mainly*" a particular type of music. For example, "*mainly current adult contemporary music*." Our approach is that this means a listener should hear a current track more often than not when they switch on general (i.e. non-specialist) programming. But, this does not mean a bare majority (say 51% current tracks) is sufficient. We expect a significantly higher proportion than this for a station to be operating within the overall spirit of the Format (although we do not believe it would be right to put specific figures on this, as every case will differ).

Similarly, what constitutes "*current*" is also open to interpretation, but only in relation to the overall character of the particular service concerned. We do not propose to say that, for every type of commercial radio station, *current* tracks must be less than a year old. But, equally, we would not expect the "*current*" component of a station's music policy to include a large proportion of tracks that were more than a year old.

In the case of Format definitions such as "*Adult Contemporary*," we will take a sensibly wide interpretation. For example, some artists have made tracks that could comfortably be classified as Adult Contemporary, even though the artists' overall catalogue of work may not necessarily fall easily into that category.

Similar principles apply to other Formats. For example, where a Format requires a "*contemporary and chart music*" service, the main diet must be of modern music, reflecting the charts of today and recent months. Older, classic tracks would not be out of place, but only as spice to the main offering. If they become more dominant than that it is likely the station will be operating outside its Format.

What listeners must be able to do is recognise the station as one whose essential character is "*contemporary and chart music*." As a general guide, we might expect around two-thirds of the music played to be less than two years old, and much of that from the current charts.

For stations that have broad (i.e. non-specialist) music formats, listeners should expect to hear at any point a broad mix of genres, unless a specialist show is being broadcast (as part of its overall output).

A "*full service*" station stands apart from more mainstream stations by virtue of its wide appeal and its generous, creative speech content.

Where a station considers that there is a language that is of particular interest to people in the local area it may include content in that language, subject to any relevant Format requirements. An important example would be content in the Welsh Language which is an official language in Wales.

With regard to localness, the detail (such as specific requirements to carry what's-ons and the like) may have been removed from Formats, but listener expectation means that much of that sort of material should still be carried if a station is to carry out its function of providing a

local, or locally-oriented, station for a particular geographical area. As stated in the February 2008 letter referred to above, if a service is described as locally focused or locally oriented, we would not expect hour after hour to pass by with no local content.

Format changes

Formats can be changed with Ofcom's consent, in accordance with the provisions of section 106 of the Broadcasting Act 1990.