

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Winchester

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Winchester to UK DAB Networks 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 (“the 1996 Act”) 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 of applications

On 1 September 2020 Ofcom published a notice inviting applications for licences to provide small-scale radio multiplex services in several localities, including in Winchester.

Ofcom received one application in response to its notice inviting applications for this locality by the closing date of applications which was 23 November 2020, which was from UK DAB Networks Limited (‘UKDAB’). A copy of the con-confidential parts of the application was made available for

public scrutiny on the Ofcom website, and public comment was invited as required under section 50(7) of the 1996 Act.

Ofcom colleagues assessed the detail of applications, including carrying out assessments of the technical plans required to be submitted as part of all applications. Decisions were made by a panel of Ofcom decision makers which convened on 11 March 2021. They carefully considered the application, public comments received, and professional advice from Ofcom colleagues, and applied the statutory criteria in reaching their decision on whether and to whom to award a licence. Reasons for their decision are summarised below.

In relation to section 51(2)(a), UKDAB proposed using two transmitters which would provide coverage for just over 68% of the adult population in the licence area advertised, according to Ofcom's analysis. Ofcom noted this was a relatively low proportion of the population in the advertised area, but was acceptable in light of more dispersed population outside the city of Winchester and challenges in reaching all parts of the advertised area. We noted that the applicant had kept the potential for causing interference to other broadcast radio services to a minimum, and there was little overspill coverage outside the advertised area.

In relation to section 51(2)(c), Ofcom considered financial and business plans, technical plans, the timetable for coverage roll-out, and evidence of relevant expertise and experience. It was noted that UKDAB's majority shareholder, Ash Elford, has considerable hands-on experience of managing the Glasgow and Portsmouth trial small-scale DAB multiplexes, and has therefore accumulated considerable knowledge of the costs and risks associated with the launch and operation of a small-scale radio multiplex service. UKDAB has access to funding, and would be in a good position to establish the service within 18 months of the date of award as required by the legislation.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), it was noted that no C-DSP services (prospective or actual) were participants in the applicant company. Under the legislation, involvement of such a person is a desirable feature but not a necessity for applicants.

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 in the advertised area. The decision-makers noted that there were some limitations in the nature and extent of the evidence of support from such persons, and particularly from prospective C-DSPS providers. Overall, however, we concluded that there was sufficient evidence of support, including a commitment from analogue community radio station Winchester FM to putting two programme services on the multiplex, to justify the award of a licence in light of Ofcom's duties. These include amongst other things to secure in carrying out our functions the optimal use of electro-magnetic spectrum, and to secure the availability throughout the UK of a range of radio services.

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.

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 require amendments to the technical plan between award and licence grant.