

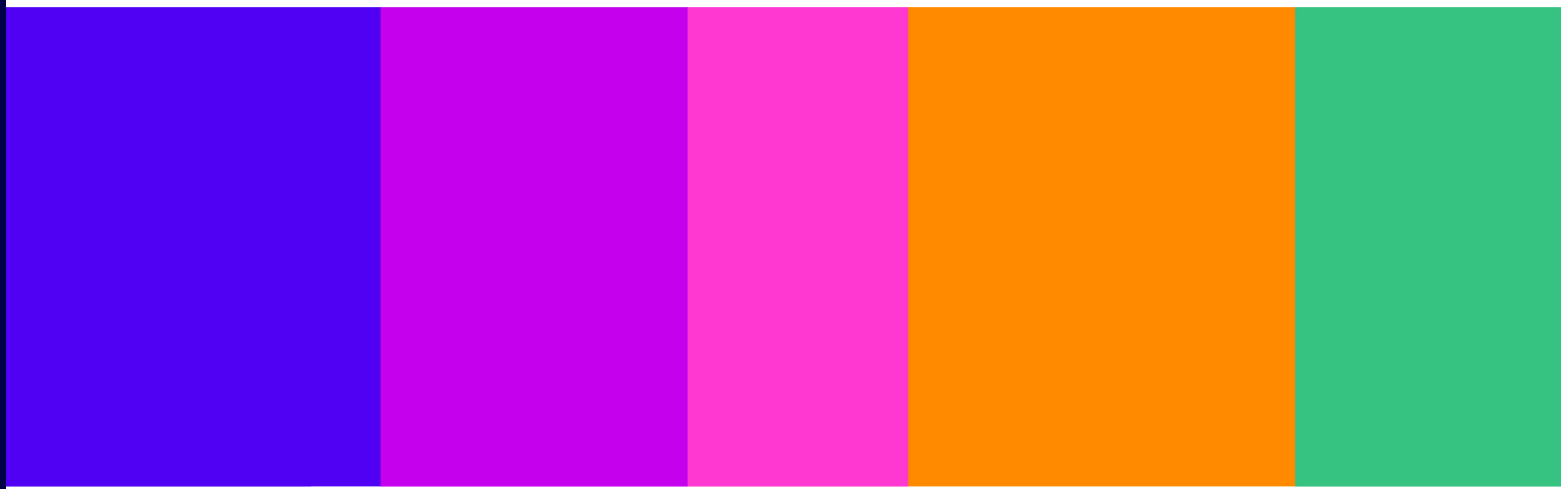
Small-scale DAB frequency change: Cheshire Mid

Statement on the request to change the frequency of the Cheshire Mid small-scale radio multiplex

Statement

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1. Overview

- 1.1 A radio multiplex service is the means by which DAB digital radio stations are broadcast. This document sets out Ofcom’s decision on a request to change the frequency upon which the Cheshire small-scale radio multiplex service is broadcast.
- 1.2 Ofcom is required to consult before deciding whether to agree to such a request. We did so in a consultation that closed on 14 January 2026, and our decision takes account of consultation responses received. The overview section of this document is a simplified high-level summary only. The decision we have taken and our reasoning are set out in the full document below.

What we are proposing – in brief

We have decided to exercise our discretion under section 54A(2) of the Broadcasting Act 1996 (as modified by the Small-scale Radio Multiplex and Community Digital Radio Order 2019) to approve an application from Niocast Digital Ltd to vary the small-scale radio multiplex licence for Chesire Mid so as to change the frequency upon which the small-scale radio multiplex service is broadcast.

2. Process for changing the frequency of a licensed multiplex

Licence areas for small-scale radio multiplexes

- 2.1 Small-scale radio multiplex licences are granted by Ofcom principally to enable the provision of community and local digital sound programme services on the DAB (Digital Audio Broadcasting) platform. The statutory basis for licensing small-scale radio multiplexes is the Broadcasting Act 1996, as modified by the Small-scale Radio Multiplex and Community Digital Radio Order 2019 (the “Broadcasting Act”).
- 2.2 The holder of a small-scale radio multiplex licence is responsible for, among other things, delivering its service in accordance with a technical plan agreed by Ofcom prior to grant of the licence. The technical plan contains details of the transmitter site(s) from which the multiplex service is broadcast, and other technical details such as power levels and aerial patterns etc.
- 2.3 For small-scale radio multiplexes, the technical plan effectively defines the licensed area of the service. Ofcom publishes coverage maps showing the coverage and therefore extent of the licensed areas for such services. It should be noted these are indicative only, based on computer models rather than actual measurement, and on a defined predicted signal level deemed sufficient to qualify as “receivable”. They are subject to some variation due to possible interference from other services and seek to estimate in-building coverage only. Nevertheless, such models provide a reasonable estimate of the coverage achieved by the technical plan appended to a licence.

Statutory framework for variations

- 2.4 Under section 54A(2) of the Broadcasting Act, Ofcom is able to vary a small-scale radio multiplex licence by—
 - a) varying the frequency on which the licensed service is required to be provided,
 - b) reducing the area or locality in which the licensed service is required to be available, or
 - c) extending that area or locality to include an adjoining area or locality.
- 2.5 Section 54A(3) and (4) further specify that Ofcom must have received an application for the variation from the licence holder, and that this application must include a technical plan relating to the service proposed to be provided under the licence indicating, in particular—
 - a) the area or locality which would be within the coverage area of the service,
 - b) the timetable in accordance with which that coverage would be achieved, and
 - c) the technical means by which it would be achieved.
- 2.6 Under section 54(5), before deciding whether to grant the application, OFCOM must publish a notice specifying—
 - a) the proposed variation of the licence, and
 - b) a period in which representations may be made to OFCOM about the proposal.

- 2.7 Finally, section 54(7) states that Ofcom may vary a licence in accordance with an application, *“only if they are satisfied that doing so would not unacceptably reduce the number of community or local digital sound programme services available to persons living in the area or locality for which, before the proposed variation, the small-scale radio multiplex service is required to be available.”*

Policy framework for variations

- 2.8 Whilst the above sets out the statutory framework for variations, section 54A(2) provides Ofcom with a discretionary power. That is, we can give approval if the statutory conditions are met but we are not required to do so.
- 2.9 We first assess whether a requested change in transmission arrangements constitutes a frequency change, a reduction in the licensed area, or an extension of the licensed area to an adjoining area.
- 2.10 Where a request, if approved, would result in a change of frequency or a decrease in overall coverage of the multiplex service (as measured by adult population coverage), Ofcom will generally consider these to fall within the scope of section 54A and thus will need to be consulted upon before Ofcom can reach a decision.
- 2.11 Where a request, if approved, would result in an overall increase in coverage for the multiplex service (as measured by adult population coverage), Ofcom will determine whether it constitutes an extension of the area in which the licensed service is required to be available to include an adjoining area. We interpret ‘adjoining area’ in this context to mean an area of new coverage outside the existing licensed area which, whether measured in terms of the specific location(s), geographical size(s) or population coverage(s), could reasonably be considered to be material – we recognise there is a difference between overspill coverage that is unavoidable and intentional extra coverage. We will also take account of whether that adjoining area is, or will potentially be, served by another small-scale radio multiplex service, and whether it was or wasn’t part of the original area advertised by Ofcom.
- 2.12 If we determine that the proposed change in transmission arrangements would result in an extension of the licensed area to an adjoining area, the request will need to be consulted upon before Ofcom can reach a decision.
- 2.13 In circumstances where a change would result in an overall increase in coverage for the multiplex service but not constitute an extension of the licensed area to an adjoining area, we will nevertheless also consider whether any coverage which is lost as a result of the changes is of sufficient magnitude and/or significance such that a consultation would still be appropriate. In reaching this view, we will have regard to the extent of any coverage losses both in terms of the absolute numbers of people who are predicted to lose coverage of the multiplex service, but also in terms of the geographical location(s) where coverage is predicted to be lost. We are likely to attach greater weight to coverage losses in the core population centre(s) of the licensed area than to losses at the periphery of the licensed area, or where losses are dispersed across sparsely-populated areas.
- 2.14 For all requests to change transmission arrangements, Ofcom will not give its approval unless it is satisfied in relation to all the following technical requirements:

- a) Overlap with any relevant local multiplex(es) remains not greater than 40% (in line with the policy intention of section 50(2A)(c) of the BA1996 to limit such overlaps).
- b) Any international constraints are adhered to.
- c) There is no significant increase in the level of interference to multiplexes elsewhere.¹

2.15 Ofcom will also consider:

- a) Whether the reason(s) for making the change is adequately supported by evidence. In particular, we would not normally approve a reduction in coverage unless continuing with the current technical plan is demonstrably not feasible, and feasibility cannot reasonably be achieved through less impactful means.
- b) Whether there is evidence the licensee has taken reasonable steps to minimise any adverse impacts from changes to its coverage, and that any changes in coverage involving coverage reduction or extension into the coverage area of neighbouring small-scale multiplexes are unavoidable. This should include an indication of all other sites that were investigated and any reasons for selecting a preferred site.
- c) Whether any increase of overlap (or new overlaps) with the coverage of other small-scale radio multiplex services is excessive. Whilst some overlap between small-scale multiplexes is inevitable, and changes to transmission arrangements may alter this overlap, in general we would consider this should represent no more than a small proportion of the other multiplex's coverage (if on-air) or polygon (if not yet launched, or yet to be advertised), and extending coverage to a material extent into a key population centre served by a launched or planned small scale multiplex service should be avoided.

2.16 In addition, for any variation requests which are subject to consultation, if we are satisfied in relation to the statutory criterion specified in paragraph 2.7 we will also have regard to the following additional criteria when determining whether to vary the licence:

- a) whether the change in transmission arrangements would be calculated to maintain or promote the development of digital sound broadcasting otherwise than by satellite;
- b) whether the licensee's proposed coverage plan is satisfactory;
- c) whether the licensee has the ability to maintain the licensed service;
- d) whether there are sufficient safeguards in place to protect the rights and interests of stations carried on the multiplex and the rights and interests of other multiplex operators (and the stations they carry); and
- e) Any other factors that appear relevant to the particular case.

¹ For on-air multiplexes elsewhere, this means no significant impact to their actual coverage. For polygon areas that have not yet been advertised, or small-scale multiplexes where a licence has been awarded but not yet granted, this means protecting the entire population in the polygon area as at initial assessment.

3. The variation request

Proposed new technical plan

- 3.1 The licence to provide the Cheshire Mid small-scale radio multiplex service was awarded to Cheshire Radio Ltd in September 2023. The multiplex launched in October 2023. The licence was transferred to Niocast Digital Ltd ('Niocast' or 'the licensee') in June 2025.
- 3.2 Niocast has applied to vary its licence on the basis that it would like to change the frequency on which the Cheshire Mid small-scale radio multiplex is broadcast. This is to protect against the possibility of future co-channel interference with the Wigan small-scale radio multiplex, which was awarded to Wigan & St Helens DAB Limited in December 2024 and is required to launch by 03 June 2026. Niocast has stated that it does not anticipate a loss of coverage as a result of the change. This is because alongside the core proposal to change frequency, it has also requested a change of antenna and an increase in transmitter power. Niocast believes that, taken together, these measures should improve coverage for listeners in areas where it previously had been poor within the licence area originally advertised by Ofcom.
- 3.3 Annex 1 sets out a comparison between the current coverage and that which Ofcom calculates would be achieved by the revised technical plan proposed by the applicant. In brief, the revised technical plan proposes to change the frequency block from 9C to 10B, removing Cheshire Mid's co-channel relationship with Wigan, increasing its power from 100W to 297W and changing from an omnidirectional to directional antenna.
- 3.4 Ofcom calculates that these changes would result in a net increase in population coverage of 20.2% (to 63,868 adults). There is a small loss of coverage to 1,120 adults, which is more than outweighed by 11,860 adults gaining coverage under the revised plan.
- 3.5 Under section 54A of the Broadcasting Act, Ofcom is required to consult on any proposed changes to the frequency on which a small-scale radio multiplex is provided. This requirement applies whether or not the change results in either reducing the area or locality in which the licensed service is required to be made available or extending it to include an adjoining area or locality. Consequently, because a change of frequency is proposed and notwithstanding the very modest impact on coverage outlined below, we consider that the proposed changes fall within the scope of section 54A of the Broadcasting Act, and therefore need to be consulted upon before Ofcom can reach a decision.

Our Preliminary view

- 3.6 As set out in paragraph 2.7, we cannot approve Niocast's request unless we are satisfied that doing so would not unacceptably reduce the number of community or local digital sound programme services available in the area the Cheshire Mid small-scale multiplex currently serves.
- 3.7 We are, on a preliminary basis, so satisfied. This is primarily because, whilst there is a small countervailing loss of coverage to 1,120 adults, this is more than outweighed by the gain in coverage to 11,860 adults. We recognise that the increase in coverage could theoretically result in increased costs for the multiplex, and that any such increase in costs could result in higher costs for programme service providers. However, we note the licensee's argument

that the full capital cost of the changes will be borne by Wigan & St Helens DAB Ltd (i.e. the Wigan licence awardee), and that it anticipates no change to carriage fees.

- 3.8 As well as considering the request in relation to the above statutory criterion, we also have policy criteria we take into account (as set out in paragraphs 2.14 – 2.16) in deciding whether to exercise our discretion to allow the variation. Of particular relevance to this request is whether any increase of overlap (or new overlap) with the coverage of other small-scale radio multiplex services is excessive and whether the licensee has taken reasonable steps to minimise any adverse impacts from changes to its coverage.
- 3.9 Ofcom’s preliminary view is that the overlapping coverage resulting from the requested changes is not excessive. The extended licence area would not result in a material increase in overlap with any neighbouring small-scale multiplexes, with the largest proportionate increase in overlap being just 1.3% (with Cheshire East). Furthermore, the extended licence area would not extend to any significant new population centres in neighbouring areas. As noted above, we would emphasise that we are consulting purely because a frequency change is involved and we do not consider this very minor impact amounts to extending coverage to include an adjoining area or locality within the meaning of section 54A(2)(c) of the Broadcasting Act.
- 3.10 Ofcom is also provisionally satisfied that the licensee has taken reasonable steps to minimise any adverse impacts from the proposed changes. Whilst, as we have highlighted above, there is a loss of coverage to 1,120 adults, this is heavily outweighed by the gain in coverage resulting from the changes. We noted the licensee’s representation in its application that listeners to the south of the existing coverage area had previously made complaints of poor coverage, and that the proposed changes would improve coverage to this area. We also noted that the proposed changes would also have the beneficial effect of reducing co-channel interference with the proposed Wigan small-scale multiplex, potentially benefitting listeners in both areas. We consider that this provides a further reason for Ofcom to exercise its discretion to allow the change.

Summary

- 3.11 Ofcom’s provisional view is that the proposed changes to the frequency on which Cheshire Mid small-scale radio multiplex is broadcast meets all the technical requirements referred to in paragraphs 2.14 – 2.15. For variation requests which are subject to consultation, we have further criteria to consider. These are listed in paragraph 2.16. We are provisionally satisfied in relation to these too.
- 3.12 On balance, having considered the matters in paragraphs 2.7 and 2.14 to 2.16, our preliminary view is that it would be appropriate to exercise our discretion to vary the Cheshire Mid small-scale radio multiplex licence in accordance with the application.

Consultation responses and Ofcom assessment

- 3.13 Ofcom received one response to the consultation, from Bolton Bury DAB Radio. This was neutral in principle about the plan to change the frequency block of the Cheshire Mid multiplex, but expressed concerns about potential interference to its own small scale radio multiplex for Bolton & Bury (which already operates using frequency block 10B). The proposed antenna for Cheshire Mid is directional to the south and east and thus is restricted northwards in the direction of Bolton and Bury.

- 3.14 Our modelling of the change of frequency block and directional antenna proposed by the Cheshire Mid licensee indicates that there could be a small impact upon the availability of the Bolton & Bury multiplex due to co-channel interference. However, the main population impact is predicted to occur in the Oldham area, which is outside the main service area of Bolton & Bury multiplex. Should this prove to be incorrect in practice, Ofcom can request that an interference assessment is carried out by the licensee and, potentially, require that appropriate mitigation measures be put in place.
- 3.15 For the above reasons, whilst noting that Bolton Bury DAB Radio's response was based on legitimate concerns over potential impact, Ofcom does not consider it provides grounds for departing from our preliminary view.

Ofcom's decision

- 3.16 We have therefore decided, for the reasons set out above, to exercise our discretion under section 54A(2) of the Broadcasting Act 1996 (as modified by the Small-scale Radio Multiplex and Community Digital Radio Order 2019) to approve the application from Niocast Digital Ltd to vary the small-scale radio multiplex licence for Mid Cheshire so as to change the frequency on which it is broadcast.

A1. The proposed change

A1.1 The licensee is proposing three changes to its current technical parameters:

- a change of frequency block from 9C to 10B.
- a power increase at its Northwich Youth Centre transmitter from 100W to 297W.
- a change in antenna from omnidirectional to directional.

A1.2 A summary of the currently licensed and proposed coverages is given below, together with a comparison of the coverage provided by each plan, and population counts of the adults (aged 15+) within the areas.

A1.3 The coverage maps indicate where the small-scale radio multiplex service should be receivable on a DAB digital radio within a typical domestic building².

A1.4 However, please note the following caveats:

- a) The maps are based on computer predictions rather than actual measurements, so is indicative only.
- b) 'Receivable' is based on the defined signal level required by a receiver that meets the minimum receiver specification (available here: [Minimum specifications for DAB and DAB+ personal and domestic digital radio receivers: Digital radio action plan report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)), although that level may not be adequate for receivers built to a poorer sensitivity, or be sufficient in every location.
- c) The maps do not take account of any interference from other DAB digital radio services. The likelihood of any such interference will increase as more DAB services are launched, but Ofcom will seek to reduce the impact as far as is reasonably practicable.
- d) The maps do not show where reception outside homes (e.g. along roads) may be possible.

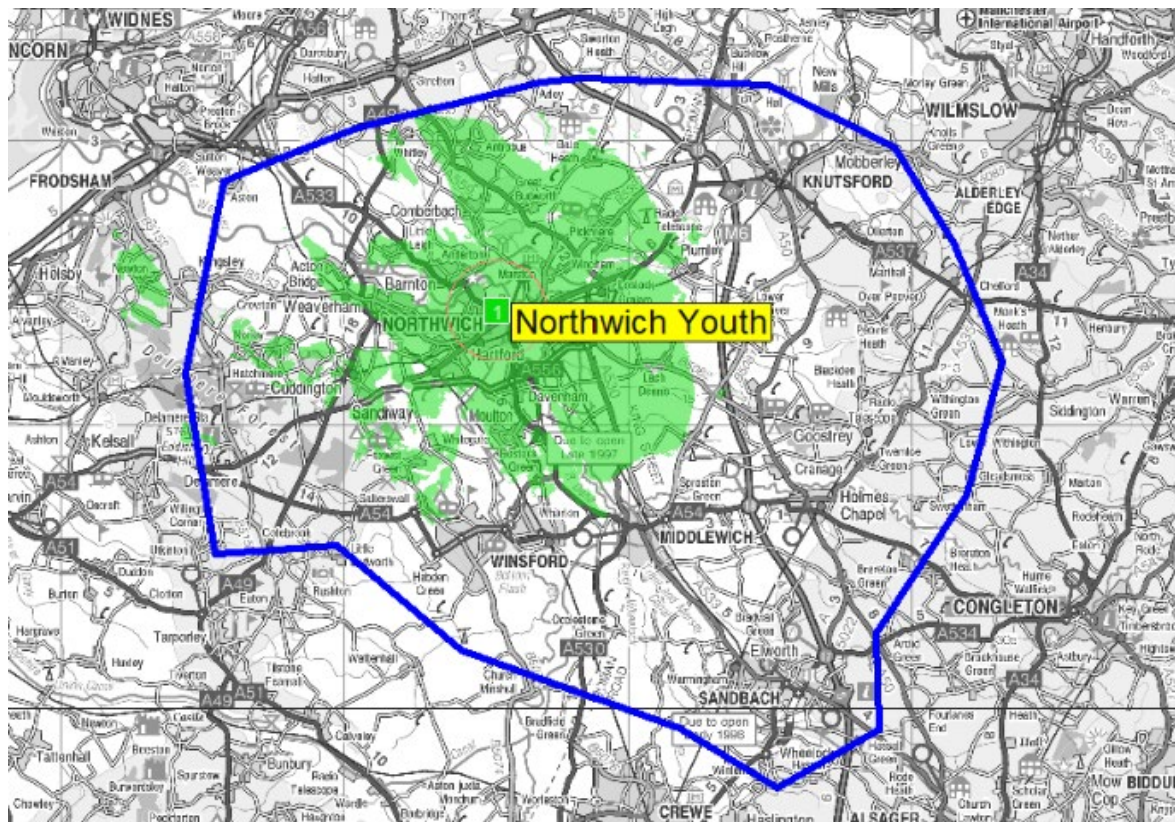
Coverage required by current licence

Currently licensed transmitter details

Site name	NGR	Site height	Power (W)	Aerial height	Aerial Pattern
Northwich Youth Centre	SJ6542674070	31m	100	12m	Omnidirectional

² The areas classed as served are where we predict a field strength of at least 63dBµV/m at 10m above ground level, which corresponds to providing a service at 80% location probability and 50% time availability, as set out in our [Technical policy guidance for DAB multiplex licensees \(ofcom.org.uk\)](http://www.ofcom.gov.uk)

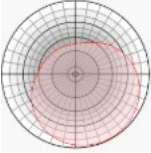
Map of currently licensed coverage



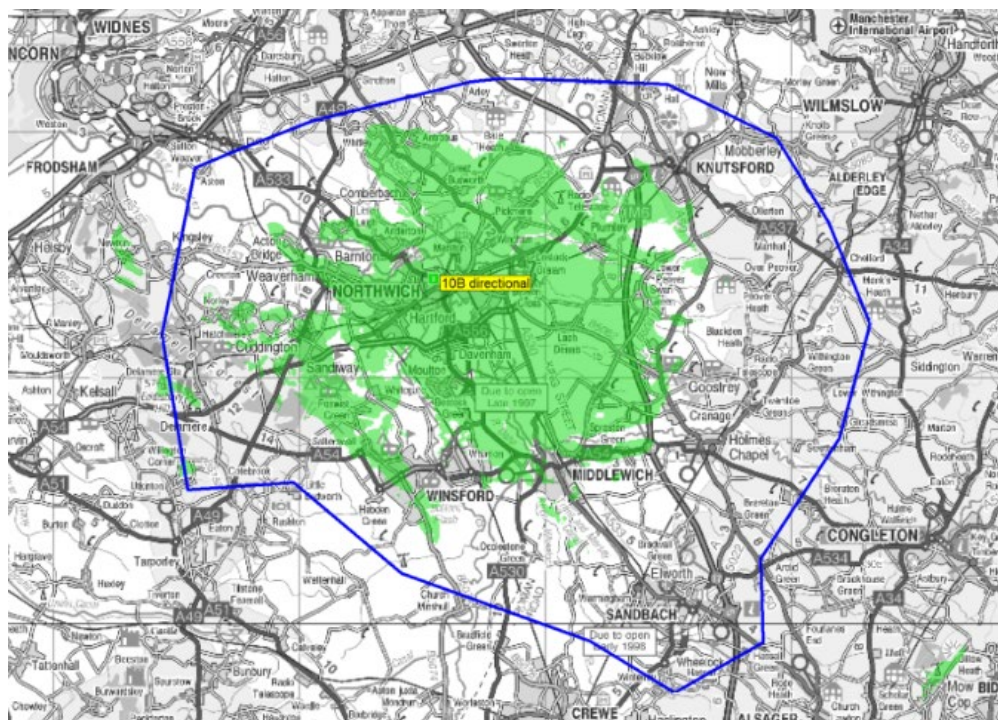
Coverage shown is for predicted indoor coverage ($63\text{dB}\mu\text{V}/\text{m}$ at 10m above ground level)

Coverage proposed by the licensee

Proposed transmitter details

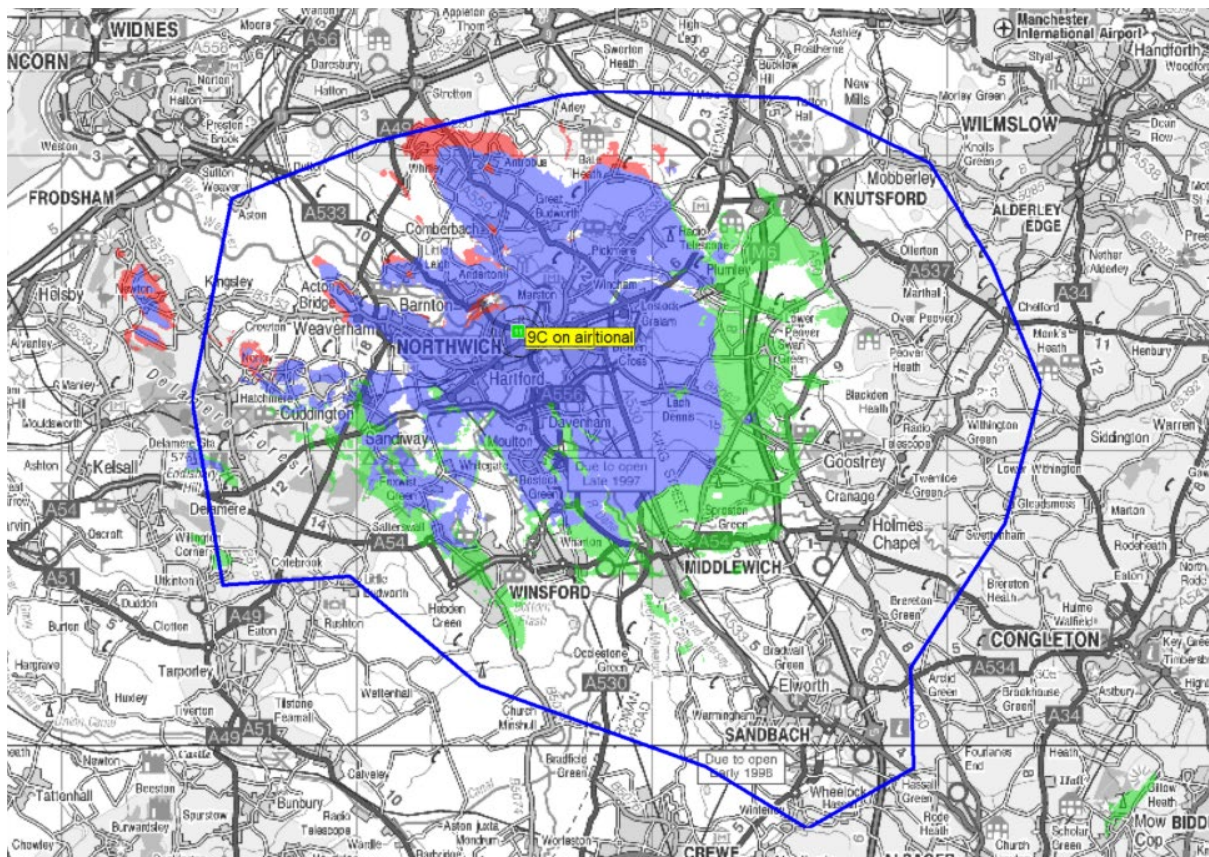
Site name	NGR	Site height	Power (W)	Aerial height	Aerial Pattern
Northwich Youth Centre	SJ65426740 70	31m	297	12m	 <p>Directional</p>

Map of proposed coverage



Coverage shown is for predicted indoor coverage (63dB μ V/m at 10m above ground level)

Comparison of coverage

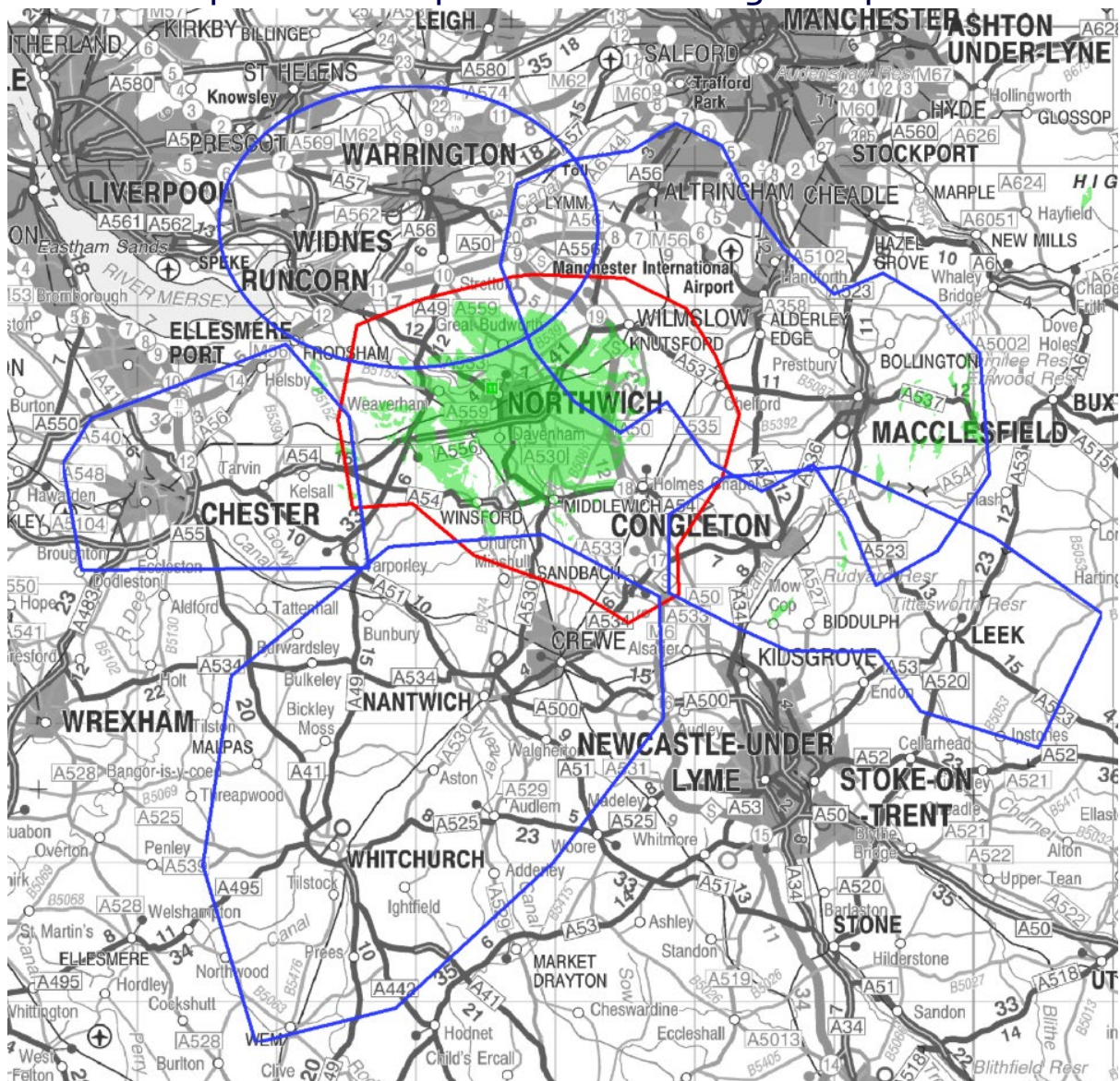


Coverage shown is for predicted indoor coverage (63dBµV/m at 10m above ground level)

Coverage summary table (adults 15+)

Coverage Predictions	Total Adults	Polygon Adults
Population served by currently licensed coverage	53,128	52,897
Population served by proposed coverage	63,868	63,645
Net population change	+10,740	+10,748
Overlapping Coverage (blue)	52,008	52,008
Loss of Coverage (red)	1,120	889
Gain in Coverage (green)	11,860	11,637

Proposed overlap with surrounding multiplexes



Green – Cheshire Mid multiplex coverage

Overlap with neighbouring Small-Scale DAB (status) population coverage	Current Overlap		New Overlap		Change	
Cheshire East (on air overlap) 264,270	2,887	10.9%	3,235	12.2%	+348	+1.3%pt
Congleton & Leek (on air overlap) 72,558	188	0.3%	894	1.2%	+706	+0.9%pt
Crewe & Nantwich (on air overlap) 103,125	0	0%	223	0.2%	+223	+0.2%pt
Chester (R8 advert polygon overlap) 103,518	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%pt
Warrington (on air overlap) 346,640	1,303	0.4%	1,043	0.3%	-260	-0.1%pt

A2. Impact assessments

Impact assessment

- A2.1 Section 7 of the Communications Act 2003 requires that, where we are proposing to do anything for the purposes of, or in connection with, the carrying out of our functions, and it appears to us that the proposal is important, we are required to carry out and publish an assessment of the likely impact of implementing the proposal, or a statement setting out our reasons for thinking that it is unnecessary to carry out such an assessment.
- A2.2 We do not consider the request will have any substantial adverse impact on citizens and consumers. We acknowledge that the proposed changes will have an adverse impact on the 1,120 adults who are expected to lose coverage, and will consequently see their access to community or local digital sound programme services disappear. However, we note that this is a relatively small proportion of the overall population within the coverage area and significantly smaller than the number of adults who will gain coverage.
- A2.3 We also note the potential positive impact the change in frequency will have on co-channel interference with the Wigan small-scale radio multiplex, which has been awarded to Wigan & St Helens DAB Ltd, and is required to launch no later than June 2026.

Equality Impact assessment

- A2.4 Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (the 2010 Act) imposes a duty on Ofcom, when carrying out its functions, to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other prohibited conduct related to protected characteristics under the 2010 Act. The 2010 Act also requires Ofcom to have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between persons who share specified protected characteristics and persons who do not.
- A2.5 As noted above, the planned changes may have an adverse impact on the 1,120 citizens and consumers in the area predicted to lose coverage. We do not consider that this will have an undue impact on any particular group, especially given that the area expected to lose coverage is demographically very similar to the areas that will gain from the coverage.