

Licensing Priorities for Broadcast Radio

Consultation on Ofcom's proposed strategic approach to broadcast radio licensing

[Welsh version available](#)

Consultation

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1. Overview

What we are proposing – in brief

As the rollout of the Small-Scale Digital Audio Broadcasting (SSDAB) licensing programme comes to a close, we propose to prioritise, where appropriate, the following broadcast licensing activity for the short to medium term:

- requests to advertise new SSDAB multiplex areas;
- requests to advertise further local DAB multiplex licences in areas where there is both obvious demand and frequencies are available;
- applications from existing SSDAB multiplex licensees to improve or extend the coverage of the multiplex;
- a more flexible approach, where appropriate, in our application of the ‘40% ceiling’ regarding SSDAB;
- consideration of application rounds for new FM community radio licences;
- applications for renewals and extensions for commercial and community analogue licences;
- applications from existing commercial and community analogue licensees for technical changes;
- support for ongoing licensing programmes which are already being undertaken; and
- continuing to provide ongoing support for incumbent licensed services.

We propose to not generally prioritise work on licence types with diminishing audiences, limited services and/or little to no spectrum availability. This includes, for example, new local commercial analogue licences and national licences for FM services and DAB multiplexes.

The aim of the proposals is to make the best use of finite spectrum resources and achieve the greatest benefit to UK audiences, particularly those which are currently underserved. We will continue to support licensing that we consider will, in the round, deliver the most benefits for consumers and citizens.

In considering these proposals we have taken into account our duties, functions, market conditions and audiences’ listening habits.

We invite stakeholders’ views on whether they agree with our proposed licensing priorities for broadcast radio for the short to medium term.

The full list of consultation questions is set out in **Annex A6**.

The closing date for responses is 08 April 2026.

The overview section in this document is a simplified high-level summary only. The proposals we are consulting on and our reasoning are set out in the full document.

2. Background

- 2.1 Ofcom is the independent regulator for the UK communications sector, including broadcasting. We have a range of duties and powers relating to this sector, including those in the Broadcasting Act 1990 (the ‘BA 1990’), Broadcasting Act 1996 (the ‘BA 1996’), Communications Act 2003 (the ‘CA 2003’) and Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006 (the ‘WTA 2006’). Our principal duty is to further the interests of citizens and consumers (where appropriate, by promoting competition). In brief, this includes securing a wide range of high-quality radio and TV services, ensuring plurality of providers and promoting optimal use of spectrum. A key function relevant to this consultation is our power to grant radio broadcast licences. We explain our duties and powers in more detail in Section 3 below.

The current broadcast radio licensing system in the UK

- 2.2 Ofcom currently licenses broadcast radio services in the UK in a variety of formats, including analogue (AM and FM) and Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB). The table below outlines the different types of licensing¹:

Area	Licences	
	Analogue	Digital
National	AM / FM national services (AN)	National radio services (DN) National multiplexes (DM)
Local and regional	AM / FM local commercial services (AL) AM / FM community services (CR) Restricted services (RSL, including LRSL)	Local commercial services (DP) Community services (C-DSP) Local multiplexes (DL) Small-scale multiplexes (DS)

- 2.3 Analogue radio licences provide for both the content and AM/FM transmission, whereas for digital we license and regulate the radio services’ content and the DAB multiplexes² that carry radio services separately. Multiplexes are split into three types based on their level of geographic coverage – national, local and small scale.
- 2.4 In addition, we issue Restricted Service Licences (RSLs), which include:
- short term licences that cover broadcasts for specific events (e.g. shows, drive in movies and dedicated radio services for religious observances such as Ramadan); and
 - licences for services covering very small areas (e.g. hospital radio and army bases).
- 2.5 Ofcom issues new broadcast licences in a variety of ways, both in competitive award processes and non-competitive processes, which adhere to detailed procedures. For example, for analogue community radio licenses, applications can only be submitted to

¹ The abbreviations in brackets in the table are the prefixes used by Ofcom to identify the licence types.

² Multiplexes are the means by which DAB radio content produced by radio stations is combined and distributed at a national or local level to users, who can select that station at home, or in the car, on a radio device.

Ofcom during a licensing round and within the period specified in a published Invitation to Apply (ITA).³

- 2.6 For all broadcast licence types, Ofcom must consider the suitability of the applicant to hold a licence and will consider the relevant criteria. In addition to licensing new broadcast services, Ofcom also considers applications for changes to existing broadcast licences and may: approve technical change requests; give consent to transfers of licences; and, as licences approach their end dates, grant renewals and extensions to their duration. We carry out our work in this area in line with statutory requirements.
- 2.7 We do not have powers to license online-only services.
- 2.8 Ofcom's records show there are currently c.1,000 stations licensed to broadcast on DAB across the UK. There are also 543 commercial and community radio services in total broadcasting on analogue (these figures exclude BBC Radio services).

The Small-Scale DAB (SSDAB) programme

- 2.9 Small-Scale DAB (SSDAB) provides a means for delivering digital radio services inexpensively to relatively small geographic areas. The SSDAB programme has created a robust and reliable route for existing small analogue stations to broadcast on digital, as well as a pathway for new entrants wishing to launch radio services on a digital terrestrial platform.
- 2.10 Ofcom consulted on our approach to SSDAB licensing during 2019/20.⁴ We determined following that process that the rollout of SSDAB would provide the means for a greater number of services to more communities across the UK than would be possible through more analogue licensing. In addition, because the licensing of SSDAB and analogue services would draw resource from the same Ofcom teams (and we could not provide for both simultaneously at an acceptable rate), we made the SSDAB programme our priority for licensing at that time. Since then, we have not licensed any new FM analogue community radio services in the UK (other than in one exceptional case⁵).
- 2.11 Ofcom has advertised SSDAB multiplex licences in batches through a competitive process, in which applications are judged against specific statutory criteria. We planned to make awards available in eight rounds and made our first multiplex awards in March 2021. The application window for Round Eight (the final planned round of licensing) closed on 10 December 2025 and we have received 22 applications in total. We expect the assessment of these applications to be completed by the summer of 2026.⁶

³ To illustrate further, in previous licensing rounds of this type, Ofcom has published Expressions of Interest to understand both the level of demand of potential applications and to complete preliminary spectrum analysis in the areas stakeholders have expressed an interest. This has enabled Ofcom to invite applications in specific regions based on both the demand for a licence in specified regions and frequency availability in these areas.

⁴ See [Statement: Licensing small-scale DAB – how Ofcom will exercise its new functions](#)

⁵ This exceptional case took place before we commenced the first round of SSDAB licensing, which was delayed by the covid pandemic.

⁶ The applicants awarded small-scale licences have 18 months to launch after award, which means that the last of the Round 8 awardees must come on air by around the end of 2027.

Our opportunity to set out our proposed strategic licensing priorities for broadcast radio

- 2.12 As the current SSDAB programme comes to a close, we have an opportunity to consider our strategic broadcast licensing priorities for radio for the short to medium term. In this regard we have considered:
- our existing commitments;
 - the changing landscape for radio in the UK;
 - audience trends;
 - changes in the legal framework; and
 - spectrum resource considerations.
- 2.13 In addition, we recently published a [Call for Input](#) on our Review of Broadcast Regulation. This asked stakeholders for their views on how broadcast regulation needs to evolve in the longer term to reflect the significant changes in how audiences listen and view content. We recognise the licensing framework is likely to need fundamental reform in the longer term so that it reflects a wholly digital environment and this would require legislative change. This consultation on our proposed strategic approach for broadcast radio licensing is therefore designed to address issues in the short to medium term and should be read in the context of our wider Review of Broadcast Regulation. Our objective through our proposals is to utilise our resources to obtain the best value for audiences in the short to medium term through our broadcast licensing work.
- 2.14 The next sections set out our considerations, analysis and explain the rationale for our proposed strategic approach.

3. Considerations for our proposed strategy

- 3.1 In this section we explore the matters we have considered in developing our future proposed strategy.

Our existing commitments

- 3.2 In our [Plan of Work 2025/26](#) we made commitments to maintain current levels of broadcast licensing support, including:
- licensing TV and radio broadcast services: we said we would continue to issue, manage and maintain licences for all national and local commercial TV, digital commercial and digital community radio services and restricted analogue radio services. We also said we would respond to stakeholder requests to make changes to their licences where appropriate; and
 - supporting platforms for broadcast services: we said we would continue to license SSDAB services throughout the UK and complete the process for renewing Local TV licences.
- 3.3 We have made good progress in all areas across the 25/26 period to date.
- 3.4 Ofcom is also currently consulting on its [Proposed Plan of Work 2026/27](#). In that consultation we have set out our proposed intention to continue to issue, manage and maintain licences for all national and local commercial TV, digital commercial and digital community radio services and restricted analogue radio services. We have also said that we will remain responsive to stakeholder requests to make changes to their licences where appropriate. Ofcom will publish a statement on its finalised Plan of Work 2026/7 in March 2026.

The changing landscape for broadcast radio in the UK

- 3.5 Analogue BBC services were introduced in the 1920s and were followed by commercial radio in the 1970s and digital radio in the 1990s. The sector has continued to expand through online-only services and the carriage of licensed services through apps such as BBC Sounds and Radioplayer. Given the increase in platforms and content services, UK audiences have never been better served in terms of radio and audio.
- 3.6 The community radio sector in particular has grown in recent years, with 300 analogue services currently available, the vast majority on FM, as well over 200 CDSPs carried on DAB (via SSDAB or, occasionally, local DAB) providing local content to communities across the UK.
- 3.7 Meanwhile, the DCMS's [Digital Radio and Audio Review](#) (2021)⁷, which examined likely future listening trends and recommendations for strengthening UK radio and Audio noted

⁷ The Digital Radio and Audio Review was commissioned by the government in February 2020.

that “over the past seven years or so, the decline in AM listening has followed a relatively consistent, linear trajectory...”⁸ It further explained that:

“given the steady decline in AM listening generally, further retirement of AM services and decommissioning of AM sites is likely to continue irrespective of any regulatory intervention. In light of this, there is no need for regulatory intervention to set a single mandated AM switch-off date.”⁹

3.8 Furthermore, Ofcom’s recent [2025 Media Nations UK Report](#) stated that the number of AM medium wave (MW) stations is decreasing, in part due to the higher operating costs associated with maintaining the AM transmission infrastructure set against diminishing audiences.¹⁰ We note that AM transmitters have a relatively high energy consumption, and much of the infrastructure is nearing the end of its useful life. Indeed, some commercial AM radio licences have been handed back to Ofcom in recent years¹¹ and other providers have sought to reduce the coverage of their AM national commercial radio licences.¹²

3.9 However, there are still benefits to AM transmission, notably being able to broadcast over longer distances. This makes it an important platform for some audiences who may rely on its extended reach when FM and DAB may be insufficient. Its wide geographical coverage also gives AM the ability to target specific minority communities that may be geographically dispersed (e.g. Asian communities).

3.10 The [Digital Radio and Audio Review](#) report also concluded that:

“...traditional radio, including FM services, is valued by many listeners – particularly those who are older or vulnerable, drive older cars or live in areas with limited DAB or broadband coverage. On current trends, therefore, the Review’s conclusion is that FM will be needed until at least 2030.”¹³

3.11 The report also stated that:

“Whilst there is a degree of uncertainty with forward forecasts, 2030 is a realistic time frame providing a framework to guide decisions by industry stakeholders whilst giving reassurance for listeners that a broad range of FM stations will continue to be available. For this reason, it is recommended that Ofcom should, when carrying out its statutory requirements, continue to plan on the basis that spectrum for FM radio services will be needed until at least 2030.”¹⁴

3.12 We have therefore thought carefully about the appropriate strategic approach for our broadcast licensing priorities in the context of this shifting landscape.

⁸ Paragraph 6.11 of [Digital radio and audio review](#).

⁹ Paragraph 6.12 of the [Digital radio and audio review](#).

¹⁰ Ofcom [Media Nations 2025](#), p.71.

¹¹ This is the process by which licences are voluntarily handed back to Ofcom, which means that the service concerned can no longer lawfully be broadcast.

¹² For example, talkSPORT sought permission to reduce the coverage of its AM national commercial radio licence in 2024/5 – see [Consultation: talkSPORT – proposals to reduce AM coverage](#).

¹³ Paragraph 0.13, [Digital radio and audio review - GOV.UK](#).

¹⁴ Paragraph 6.8, [Digital radio and audio review - GOV.UK](#).

Audience trends

- 3.13 Radio continues to be very popular in the UK: according to RAJAR (the industry body responsible for measuring radio audiences in the UK), 86% of adults aged 15 and over tuned into the radio for an average of 20.4 hours per week in Q3 2025.¹⁵ In terms of audience demographics, radio listening in general tends to skew towards older audiences, with an average audience age of 48, although this varies greatly by broadcaster, brand and the type of station.¹⁶
- 3.14 While weekly reach remains high, how people access radio is changing. Ofcom's 2025 [Audio Listening in the UK](#) report, which outlines Ofcom's latest research into people's audio listening, shows a broad shift away from analogue and towards **digital** platforms like DAB and online. This is in part due to in-car DAB technology becoming more widely available, as well as greater take-up of connected devices including smart phones and smart speakers.¹⁷ As of Q3 2025, DAB accounted for 42% of live radio listening, while smart speakers and other online devices accounted for 30% and AM/FM radio sets 26%.¹⁸ However, DAB listening is largely dependent on coverage levels, which vary across the UK – the latest [Media Nations 2025](#) report noted that, while England enjoys high levels of DAB coverage for homes and major roads, coverage levels in Wales and Scotland, especially for the Sound Digital¹⁹ and local DAB multiplexes, remain lower, potentially limiting listener choice in certain areas.
- 3.15 **Commercial** radio stations account for the majority of live radio listening (54.9% of weekly hours), mostly stemming from increased DAB coverage (commercial radio has a higher percentage of listening via DAB than via other platforms) and a push from the sector to maximise use of the existing multiplexes and radio brands.²⁰
- 3.16 However, **community** radio accounts for the largest number of individual FM licences. These stations typically cover a small geographic area and, in some cases, are unavailable on DAB due to the lack of a local SSDAB multiplex or because carriage on local commercial multiplexes is financially unviable for most community radio services (and far exceeds the wanted coverage area).
- 3.17 Community radio services, both analogue and digital, are required by statute to provide tangible benefits to the communities they serve through the provision of social gain. Ofcom's recently commissioned [research measuring the social gain of community radio](#) reported that:

“Community radio stations play an important role in providing a voice to local communities across the UK. They serve as a platform for underrepresented groups, encouraging local identity, culture, and social engagement. These stations are operated largely by volunteers and offer a unique mix of locally-produced content that reflects the diverse interests and needs of their target communities. Beyond

¹⁵ RAJAR Q3 2025.

¹⁶ Ofcom [Media Nations 2025 - UK Report](#), p.83.

¹⁷ Ofcom [Audio Listening in the UK 2025](#), p.12.

¹⁸ RAJAR Q3 2025. Remaining hours (3%) accounted for by digital television. DAB figure includes DAB+.

¹⁹ Sound Digital is a national commercial digital radio multiplex in the UK, owned by Arqiva, Bauer Media Group and News Broadcasting. The multiplex covers 73% of the population from a total of 45 transmitters.

²⁰ Ofcom [Media Nations 2025 - UK Report](#), p.80/81.

entertainment, community radio contributes to social inclusion, education, civic participation, and local economic development.”²¹

- 3.18 Therefore, despite the technological challenges, analogue services are clearly still valued by certain population groups and communities. We have taken this into account when proposing our strategic priorities.

Spectrum availability

- 3.19 As the UK’s communications regulator we manage the [radio spectrum](#). This is a finite national resource that needs to be carefully managed to ensure that it is used efficiently and that interference between users is controlled. As a result, certain bands of spectrum are used for different purposes. For example, DAB, FM and AM radio are all transmitted on different parts of the spectrum.
- 3.20 As we have been licensing both analogue and digital services for several decades, the amount of spectrum available for particular types of new broadcast radio licensing is significantly limited. However, these limitations are not evenly distributed across the spectrum. For example, national radio stations operate at high power and have therefore used large chunks of the available spectrum, while community radio stations (for example) have been “fitted into” the smaller gaps.
- 3.21 There is no more capacity for any additional national FM radio services, nor for additional wide area coverage services in most areas. Some opportunities do exist in more sparsely populated areas where demand has been lower, although financial viability may as a result be more challenging. Depending on the target location, coverage of any new FM services might be very limited to fit into the available space without causing interference to existing services.
- 3.22 For DAB, the situation is similar in that there is no availability for an additional national DAB multiplex and there are only limited opportunities for more local-scale multiplexes. There are some opportunities for SSDAB in areas where we have not previously advertised multiplexes. Similarly, limited opportunities exist where we have advertised licences but the services have not been applied for or launched or have covered more limited geographical areas than originally anticipated.²²

Changes in the legal framework – introduction of the Media Act 2024

- 3.23 The applicable legal framework mainly derives from our duties and powers in the CA 2003, WTA 2006, BA 1990 and BA 1996, including those relating to licence extensions of existing community or commercial local licences.²³
- 3.24 The implementation of Part 5 (“Regulation of Radio Services”) of the [Media Act 2024](#) (the ‘Media Act’) changed the legal framework for our local analogue radio licensing work, which is the first major update to media legislation for 20 years. The Media Act removed

²¹ Executive Summary, [Measuring the Social Gain of Community Radio](#).

²² The reasons why some multiplex services have failed to launch after being awarded a licence is explained and considered in our [SSDAB progress report 2024](#).

²³ See section 253 of the CA 2003.

the requirement for local commercial AM/FM radio licences to include conditions for adhering to a “Format” (which dictated the station’s overall character, including music genre, audience demographic, news and local content, in order to target specific listener demographics). The Media Act introduced new news and local information requirements on which Ofcom published a consultation in July 2025. Existing licence conditions relating to news and information were retained until such time as we vary licences to contain the new conditions following that consultation.

- 3.25 The Media Act also made changes to how Ofcom regulates national and local DAB radio multiplexes. In particular, we no longer have the power to approve or refuse lineup changes and, therefore, the nature of the service that applicants propose to provide will not be a relevant factor in whether or not they are approved (this change does not affect SSDAB multiplexes). Alongside this, the statutory criteria used by Ofcom when taking licensing decisions for new local commercial DAB multiplex licences have changed. The statutory criteria relating to service line ups have been removed.

Consideration of the 40% ceiling policy

- 3.26 When inviting applications for SSDAB multiplex licences, we are currently required to have regard to the “desirability” of ensuring that the population covered by a small-scale radio multiplex service does not overlap with more than 40% of the population in the licensed area of an existing local radio multiplex service (the “40% ceiling”). In practice, Ofcom has taken the approach that this reflects an intention in the legislation to limit the overlap accordingly in awarded licences.²⁴ Therefore, following a [consultation](#) on how we would exercise our powers in this new area, we decided in 2020 that we would “apply the 40% overlap threshold in all cases” (emphasis added) on the basis that “applying the 40% limit strictly provides the advantage of clarity for stakeholders as to what is and is not acceptable”.²⁵ However, as set out in the next section, we consider it appropriate to review our approach to this.

Summary of considerations

- 3.27 **Annex A1** sets out a table of licence types and an overview of some of the factors considered above. As noted from this, digital licensing has a high stakeholder demand, while FM analogue licensing continues to have demand particularly in under-served rural locations. The table also indicates where there is no additional spectrum available (DAB and FM national). Finally, we know that maintaining existing licensing for national and local DAB licensing, together with RSL licensing and requests for technical changes (improvements and extensions) offers the most efficient use of Ofcom’s resources considering all factors including audience reach.

²⁴ This is reflected in the DCMS [statement](#) on its 2018 consultation preceding the passage of the Small Scale Radio Multiplex and Community Digital Radio Order 2019 through Parliament.

²⁵ Paragraph 4.30, [Statement: Licensing small-scale DAB – how Ofcom will exercise its new functions](#).

4. Proposed strategic approach and rationale

- 4.1 Ofcom has carefully considered the existing broadcast radio licensing work that we currently undertake, as well as the matters listed above, in order to determine how to prioritise licensing opportunities in a way which will most benefit audiences while also minimising impacts on industry stakeholders. When formulating the proposals below, we have considered our duties and powers and have briefly set these out in **Annex A2** below.²⁶
- 4.2 Based on the considerations outlined above and in **Annex A1**, we have identified the following proposed actions:
- 4.3 We propose to prioritise, where appropriate, requests to advertise new SSDAB multiplex areas. SSDAB multiplexes in new areas would allow broadcasters to provide a range of DAB services to audiences who live in the area, including community services. Moreover, spectrum is available in many areas where there is not yet a SSDAB multiplex. However, we propose to advertise new areas on an *ad hoc basis*, only where there is clear evidence of demand and potential for a sustainable service. This is because the time spent to make these awards is relatively high and there is an opportunity cost in terms of other possible licensing activity. We therefore want the services to be likely to launch and have longevity. Should this be the case, and where we have received clear and robust evidence of demand through expressions of interest provided on an ad-hoc basis to Ofcom, we propose that we would publish a licence advertisement on a case-by-case basis and not within structured rounds as we have done to date.
- 4.4 We also propose to prioritise, where appropriate, requests to advertise further local DAB multiplex licences in areas where there is both obvious demand (existing local multiplexes are at full capacity or the area is unserved) and frequencies are available. We would consider inviting applications for new local commercial radio multiplexes if there were evidence of considerable demand and support.
- 4.5 We will channel resources towards applications from existing SSDAB multiplex licensees to improve and extend coverage. This could help licensees to improve contiguous coverage for their audiences, in particular those travelling in cars, and help support the sustainability of the sector. There is spectrum available (with some constraints). Should we proceed with this proposal, we would expect licensees to apply using the established process for coverage improvements set out in Section 7 of the [SSDAB Guidance Notes](#) and would consider applications on a case-by-case basis. These applications would join a “queue” in the same way analogue improvements and extensions are currently assessed.
- In assessing any post-launch coverage improvement or extension requests, we specifically propose – where appropriate – to be more flexible in our application of the ‘40% ceiling’ regarding SSDAB. This is to avoid perverse outcomes whereby, for example, a significantly beneficial coverage improvement is rejected because the

²⁶ However, this is not a full statement of all the legal provisions which may be relevant to Ofcom’s functions to radio licensing.

overlap with a local DAB multiplex increases slightly above 40%. It would not be our intention, however, to abandon the 40% target, given that the 40% ceiling reflects a legislative intent that, where there is overlap with a local radio multiplex, the small-scale multiplex should serve only a clear minority of the population in the licensed area of the local radio multiplex. As such, the presumption would remain against a greater overlap. However, this could be rebutted in exceptional circumstances where significant public benefit could be achieved through minimal exceedance of the 40% level.

4.6 We will consider inviting applications for new community FM radio licences. Given the changes in audience habits outlined above, we think that, in most areas, DAB is more suitable and would provide better outcomes for audiences. However, we recognise that in rural areas where DAB services are financially unsustainable there may be demand for new community FM radio licences. We note that rural areas are also less likely to be served with fast broadband connectivity. There may be areas, even where DAB is available, where reception is patchy or where a particular community is underserved. Should we decide to proceed with this proposal:

- Ofcom will consider applications from any stakeholder wishing to provide an analogue FM community radio service. Once the application window has closed, Ofcom will assess whether there is spectrum available in the proposed locations. Applicants will be advised where no suitable spectrum is available to support their proposed service. However, where there is available spectrum, we will assess the applications against the statutory criteria and reject those that do not reach the required standard.
- Under this proposal, Ofcom would publish an ITA to set out the application process. Ofcom would proceed to take decisions on applications in accordance with the existing legislative and policy framework. Our expectation is that we will publish an ITA either alongside or shortly after the publication of the final statement in relation to this consultation, which we expect to be in mid to late summer 2026.

4.7 We propose to continue to prioritise applications for “duration” renewals and extensions for commercial and community analogue licences. Listening on analogue still accounts for a significant proportion of radio listening and we therefore consider there is continued demand for the renewal/extension of existing analogue commercial and community radio licences. The opportunity cost of prioritising this kind of application is relatively low and renewals and extensions do not require additional spectrum.

4.8 We also propose to continue to prioritise applications from existing commercial and community analogue licensees for technical changes, including coverage improvements and extensions of the service, in order to better serve audiences within their locality. These applications would join a ‘queue’ of requests to be dealt with when we have sufficient resource available, as is currently the case. The opportunity cost of prioritising this kind of application is relatively low and there is spectrum available (although with some limitations for FM).

4.9 We propose to continue to provide support for ongoing broadcast licensing programmes which are already being undertaken. This includes issuing new licences for community and commercial services on DAB, and RSLs. As outlined in paragraph 3.14 above, DAB remains a popular platform and continuing with these licensing programmes ensures a range of services is provided for audiences. The opportunity cost of prioritising this kind of application is also relatively low and the audience benefits relatively high.

- 4.10 We do not propose to offer new local commercial analogue licences. As set out above, analogue radio listening has dropped to 26%, compared to 30% online and via smart speakers. Meanwhile DAB listening now accounts for 42%, which demonstrates a continued audience shift to consume radio through digital means. While we accept that the proportion of listeners continuing to consume commercial radio via AM/FM radios demonstrates a justification for Ofcom to continue to support existing analogue commercial radio licensees, we do not consider that there has been significant audience demand for *new* commercial radio licences since Ofcom completed the last round of competitively awarded commercial radio licences in 2008. A further consideration is that, as noted in Section 3 above, coverage of any new FM services might need to be very limited to fit into the available spectrum, or be in more sparsely populated areas. Both of these factors are barriers to achieving a sustainable scale for commercial radio stations, which is a sector in which we have seen considerable consolidation in the past decade in order to remain viable. Finally, we anticipate that designing and consulting on a new licensing framework would take a significant amount of time. For all these reasons, we consider that focusing on other areas of licensing work is more likely to meet the needs and interests of UK audiences as listening moves to digital platforms. Given the limited audience benefits we expect such licences to deliver in the near term, and the need to ensure that our resources are directed where they can have the greatest overall impact, we consider that our efforts are better focused on supporting services that offer wider benefits for listeners and the sector.
- 4.11 We are unable to make available any further new national broadcast licences in relation to FM services and DAB multiplexes, given the lack of spectrum availability. In light of the diminishing audiences for AM and the trend we have observed of existing national AM licences being handed back to us, we propose that making further national AM licences available should not be a priority.
- 4.12 **We therefore propose to prioritise, where appropriate, the following broadcast licensing activity for the short to medium term:**
- requests to advertise new SSDAB multiplexes areas;
 - requests to advertise further local DAB multiplex licences in areas where there is both obvious demand and frequencies are available;
 - applications from existing SSDAB multiplex licensees to improve or extend the coverage of the multiplex;
 - a more flexible approach, where appropriate, in our application of the ‘40% ceiling’ regarding SSDAB;
 - consideration of application rounds for new FM community radio licences
 - applications for renewals and extensions for commercial and community analogue licences;
 - applications from existing commercial and community analogue licensees for technical changes;
 - support for ongoing licensing programmes which are already being undertaken; and
 - continuing to provide ongoing support for incumbent licensed services.

Impact assessment

- 4.13 We have set out our relevant duties and consideration of the impact of our proposals in **Annex A3** below.

Consultation questions

- 4.14 Ofcom welcomes stakeholders' views on our proposed broadcast licensing priorities for the short to medium term. The consultation questions are set out below and at **Annex A6**.

Consultation question 1:

Do you agree with the proposed broadcast licensing priorities for the short to medium term? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 2:

Do you consider that the proposed broadcast licensing priorities for the short to medium term will provide sufficient provision for audiences? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 3:

For post-launch SSDAB multiplex coverage improvement or extension requests only, do you agree with our proposed change in approach to our application of the rule which restricts overlap with local muxes to 40% of the population already covered by the local mux (the "40% ceiling")? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 4:

Do you agree with Ofcom's analysis in section 3 and at Annex A1 of the existing broadcast licence types? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 5:

Do you agree with our assessment on the impact of our proposed broadcast licensing priorities for the short to medium term at Annex A3? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 6:

Do you have any other comments to make on the proposals?

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 This consultation will be open for eight weeks. We invite stakeholders to respond any time before the consultation closes, answering any or all of the consultation questions.
- 5.2 Ofcom can provide information in a variety of formats on request, e.g. accessible PDF, large print, easy read, audio recording, or braille. If you let us know what information you require and in what format, we will consider the request and respond within 21 days.
- 5.3 During the consultation period, and ahead of the publication of the revised broadcast licensing priorities for the short to medium term, our current licensing priorities will continue to apply.
- 5.4 Once the consultation closes, we will consider the responses received and will then publish a statement summarising these responses and setting out our final decision. We will consider whether any of the responses and/or evidence received should change our proposals.
- 5.5 If, after considering the responses to this consultation, we decide to implement a different set of licensing priorities for broadcast radio in the short to medium term we will publish a statement to this effect.

A1. Analysis table

Service	Alignment with changing landscape	Perceived audience demand	Spectrum availability
AM national	X	X (except for some rural locations)	✓
AM local	X	X (except for some rural locations and minority communities)	✓
AM community	X	X (except for some rural locations and minority communities)	✓
AM RSLs	X	X (except for some rural locations and minority communities)	✓
FM national	X (better than AM but declining long-term)	✓	X
FM local	X (better than AM but declining long-term)	✓	✓ (but mostly only for some areas currently underserved)
FM community	X (better than AM but declining long-term)	✓	✓ (for some areas, pinch-points in some cities)
FM RSLs	X (better than AM but declining long-term)	?	✓ (for most areas, pinch points in some cities)
DAB national	✓	✓	X
DAB local	✓	✓	✓ (for some areas)
SSDAB	✓	✓	✓ (although some constraints in congested areas)

A2. Legal duties and powers

- A2.1 Ofcom's principal duty in carrying out its functions is to further the interests of citizens and consumers (where appropriate by promoting competition). In particular, we are required to secure the availability throughout the United Kingdom of a wide range of television and radio services which (taken as a whole) are both of high quality and calculated to appeal to a variety of tastes and interests, the maintenance of a sufficient plurality of providers of different television and radio services and the optimal use of spectrum.²⁷
- A2.2 When carrying out our duties, including those relating to radio licensing, we must have regard as relevant, among other things, to: the desirability of encouraging investment and innovation; the different needs and interests of all persons who may wish to make use of spectrum; the needs of persons with disabilities, of the elderly and of those on low incomes; the opinions of consumers in relevant markets and of members of the public generally; and the different interests of persons in the different parts of the UK, of the different ethnic communities within the UK and of persons living in rural and in urban areas.
- A2.3 In addition, we are also required, when performing our duty to further the interests of consumers, to have regard, in particular, to the interests of those consumers in respect of choice, price, quality of service and value for money.²⁸
- A2.4 Where it appears to us that any of our general duties conflict with each other in a particular case, we must secure that the conflict is resolved in the manner we think is best in the circumstances.²⁹
- A2.5 In carrying out our spectrum functions, we have a duty under section 3 of the WTA 2006 to have regard in particular to: (i) the extent to which the spectrum is available for use or further use for wireless telegraphy, (ii) the demand for use of that spectrum for wireless telegraphy and (iii) the demand that is likely to arise in future for the use of that spectrum for wireless telegraphy. We also have a duty to have regard, in particular, to the desirability of promoting: (i) the efficient management and use of the spectrum for wireless telegraphy, (ii) the economic and other benefits that may arise from the use of wireless telegraphy, (iii) the development of innovative services and (iv) competition in the provision of electronic communications services.
- A2.6 Also, in accordance with section 108 of the Deregulation Act 2015, we are required to have regard to the desirability of promoting economic growth when exercising our regulatory functions. In order to consider the promotion of economic growth, Ofcom will exercise its regulatory functions in a way that ensures that: a) regulatory action is taken only when it is needed; and b) any action taken is proportionate. The government's statutory guidance on this duty recognises drivers of economic growth to include innovation and competition.

²⁷ Section 3 of the CA 2003.

²⁸ Section 3(5) of the CA 2003.

²⁹ Section 3(7) of the Act.

A3. Impact assessments

- A3.1 Section 7 of the Communications Act requires us to carry out and publish an assessment of the likely impact of implementing proposals which would be likely to have a significant impact on businesses or the general public, or when there is a major change in Ofcom's activities.
- A3.2 More generally, impact assessments form part of good policy making and we therefore expect to carry them out in relation to a large majority of our proposals. We use impact assessments to help us understand and assess the potential impact of our policy decisions before we make them. They also help us explain the policy decisions we have decided to take and why we consider those decisions best fulfil our applicable duties and objectives in the least intrusive way. Our [impact assessment guidance](#) sets out our general approach to how we assess and present the impact of our proposed decisions.
- A3.3 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 the following protected characteristics: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex and sexual orientation. 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.
- A3.4 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the '1998 Act') imposes a separate duty on Ofcom, when carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations across a range of categories outlined in the 1998 Act. Ofcom's [Revised Northern Ireland Equality Scheme](#) explains how we comply with our statutory duties under the 1998 Act.
- A3.5 To help us comply with our duties under the 2010 Act and the 1998 Act, we assess the impact of our proposals on persons sharing protected characteristics and, in particular, whether they may discriminate against such persons or impact on equality of opportunity or good relations. When thinking about equality we think more broadly than persons that share protected characteristics identified in equalities legislation and think about potential impacts on various groups of persons (see paragraph 4.7 of our impact assessment guidance).
- A3.6 In particular, section 3(4) of the CA 2003 also requires us to have regard to the needs and interests of specific groups of persons when performing our duties, as appear to us to be relevant in the circumstances. These include:
- a) the vulnerability of children and of others whose circumstances appear to us to put them in need of special protection;
 - b) the needs of persons with disabilities, older persons and persons on low incomes; and
 - c) the different interests of persons in the different parts of the UK, of the different ethnic communities within the UK and of persons living in rural and in urban areas.

Our assessment

- A3.7 In sections 3 and 4 of this consultation we explain our proposed strategy, taking into account factors such as audience trends and needs. We have integrated our provisional assessment of the impact of our policy proposals for the purposes of section 7 of the CA 2003 throughout sections 3 and 4 and therefore within our broader discussion of why we consider these proposals are appropriate.
- A3.8 We have also examined the potential impact our policy is likely to have on people, depending on their personal circumstances. This also assists us in making sure that we are meeting our principal duty of furthering the interests of citizens and consumers, regardless of their background and identity.
- A3.9 We do not consider that the proposed policy approach set out in this consultation document would have any negative impact on persons sharing protected characteristics or on any other groups of persons, nor that it would discriminate against such persons or impact on equality of opportunity or good relations. In fact, we consider it may have substantial positive impacts.
- A3.10 Regarding community radio, we know from their remits and establishment that they allow dedicated services to reach communities including religious, national and LGBTQ+ communities that may be too small to sustain a more expensive licence type. Our research in 2025 on Measuring the Social Gain of Community Radio also concluded that:
- “...community radio stations play an important role in providing a voice to local communities across the UK. They serve as an important platform for underrepresented groups, encouraging local identity, culture, and social engagement. These stations are driven largely by volunteers and offer a unique mix of locally produced content that reflects the diverse interests and needs of their communities. Beyond entertainment, community radio contributes to social inclusion, education, civic participation, and local economic development.”*
- A3.11 One of the considerations we took into account at the time of the rollout of SSDAB was also that it would provide more services to more communities across the UK than would be possible through more analogue licensing. The potential benefits of digital community radio are therefore reflected in our proposed revised licensing strategy, in that we are proposing to provide new licensing and approving coverage improvement/extension requests for SSDAB community radio going forwards.
- A3.12 There are also benefits on specific groups brought by analogue community radio stations, which can bring radio to geographic areas currently under-served by DAB in the UK where DAB services are financially unsustainable and there is less likely to be a provision of fast broadband connectivity. They also bring benefits to specific minority communities, in particular, reaching in some cases the elderly and lower economic groups, as well as some rural communities. This is also reflected in our proposals, as we are proposing to consider inviting applications for new community FM radio licences.
- A3.13 By supporting services that bring social, cultural and economic benefits to local and minority communities, our proposals promote innovation and competition and help secure the continued availability of radio services across the UK. They also promote growth – for example, coverage extensions help existing radio stations to grow, while new licensing, where sustainable, helps new enterprises to launch and local businesses to use them to market themselves. Meanwhile, supporting community radio helps to develop a pool of

talent to help the sector grow as a whole. We therefore consider that our approach is consistent with our duties, including encouraging investment and innovation, promoting economic growth and ensuring that spectrum is used efficiently.

- A3.14 We also know that local service and events-based services (provided by RSLs) bring communities together based on shared experience. We have also taken this into account when formulating our policy position.

Welsh language

- A3.15 The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 made the Welsh language an officially recognised language in Wales. This legislation also led to the establishment of the office of the Welsh Language Commissioner who regulates and monitors our work. Ofcom is required to take Welsh language considerations into account when formulating, reviewing or revising policies which are relevant to Wales (including proposals which are not targeted at Wales specifically but are of interest across the UK).
- A3.16 Where the Welsh Language Standards are engaged, we consider the potential impact of a policy proposal on: (i) opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language; and (ii) treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language. We also consider how a proposal could be formulated so as to have, or increase, a positive impact, or not to have adverse effects or to decrease any adverse effects.
- A3.17 A number of community radio services (both analogue and digital) have commitments to broadcast content in Welsh. Indeed, as outlined in paragraph 3.14 above, coverage levels for DAB in Wales remain lower than in England, hence our proposal to continue with analogue community radio licensing could help provide increased provision.
- A3.18 We do not consider there are any additional measures we could take beyond this that would increase positive effects on opportunities to use the Welsh language. Nor do we consider that our proposals would have any adverse effect on the Welsh language or treat the Welsh language less favourably than the English language.

A4. Responding to this consultation

How to respond

- A4.1 Ofcom would like to receive views and comments on the issues raised in this document, by 5pm on 08 April 2026.
- A4.2 You can download a [response form](#). You can return this by email or post to the address provided in the response form.
- A4.3 If your response is a large file, or has supporting charts, tables or other data, please email it to broadcast.licensing@ofcom.org.uk as an attachment in Microsoft Word format, together with the cover sheet.
- A4.4 Responses may alternatively be posted to the address below, marked with the title of the consultation:
- Licensing Priorities Consultation
Broadcast Licensing Team – Broadcasting and Media Group
Ofcom
Riverside House
2A Southwark Bridge Road
London SE1 9HA
- A4.5 We welcome responses in formats other than print, for example an audio recording or a British Sign Language video. To respond in BSL:
- > send us a recording of you signing your response. This should be no longer than 5 minutes. Suitable file formats are DVDs, wmv or QuickTime files; or
 - > upload a video of you signing your response directly to YouTube (or another hosting site) and send us the link.
- A4.6 We will publish a transcript of any audio or video responses we receive (unless your response is confidential)
- A4.7 We do not need a paper copy of your response as well as an electronic version. We will acknowledge receipt of a response submitted to us by email.
- A4.8 You do not have to answer all the questions in the consultation if you do not have a view; a short response on just one point is fine. We also welcome joint responses.
- A4.9 It would be helpful if your response could include direct answers to the questions asked in the consultation document. The questions are listed at **Annex A7**. It would also help if you could explain why you hold your views and what you think the effect of Ofcom’s proposals would be.
- A4.10 If you want to discuss the issues and questions raised in this consultation, please contact us by email at broadcast.licensing@ofcom.org.uk.

Confidentiality

- A4.11 Consultations are more effective if we publish the responses before the consultation period closes. This can help people and organisations with limited resources or familiarity with the issues to respond in a more informed way. So, in the interests of transparency and good regulatory practice, and because we believe it is important that everyone who is interested in an issue can see other respondents' views, we usually publish responses on the Ofcom website at regular intervals during and after the consultation period.
- A4.12 If you think your response should be kept confidential, please specify which part(s) this applies to and explain why. Please send any confidential sections as a separate annex. If you want your name, address, other contact details or job title to remain confidential, please provide them only in the cover sheet, so that we don't have to edit your response.
- A4.13 If someone asks us to keep part or all of a response confidential, we will treat this request seriously and try to respect it, either by not publishing the response at all, or by only publishing the bits that are not confidential. Sometimes we might think it is important to disclose parts of a response that have been marked as confidential for reasons of transparency, but we will consult you before we do. Occasionally we might have a legal obligation to publish information or disclose it in court, but again, as far as possible, we will let you know.
- A4.14 To fulfil our pre-disclosure duty, we may share a copy of your non-confidential response with the relevant government department before we publish it on our website.
- A4.15 Please also note that copyright and all other intellectual property in responses will be assumed to be licensed to Ofcom to use. Ofcom's intellectual property rights are explained further in our Terms of Use.

Next steps

- A4.16 Following this consultation period, Ofcom plans to publish a statement in Summer 2026.
- A4.17 If you wish, you can register to receive mail updates alerting you to new Ofcom publications.

Ofcom's consultation processes

- A4.18 Ofcom aims to make responding to a consultation as easy as possible. For more information, please see our consultation principles in **Annex A5**.
- A4.19 If you have any comments or suggestions on how we manage our consultations, please email us at consult@ofcom.org.uk. We particularly welcome ideas on how Ofcom could more effectively seek the views of groups or individuals, such as small businesses and residential consumers, who are less likely to give their opinions through a formal consultation.
- A4.20 If you would like to discuss these issues, or Ofcom's consultation processes more generally, please contact the corporation secretary:

Corporation Secretary
Ofcom
Riverside House

2a Southwark Bridge Road
London SE1 9HA
Email: corporationsecretary@ofcom.org.uk

A5. Ofcom's consultation principles

Ofcom has seven principles that it follows for every public written consultation:

Before the consultation

1. Wherever possible, we will hold informal talks with people and organisations before announcing a big consultation, to find out whether we are thinking along the right lines. If we do not have enough time to do this, we will hold an open meeting to explain our proposals, shortly after announcing the consultation.

During the consultation

2. We will be clear about whom we are consulting, why, on what questions and for how long.
3. We will make the consultation document as short and simple as possible, with an overview of no more than two pages. We will try to make it as easy as possible for people to give us a written response.
4. When setting the length of the consultation period, we will consider the nature of our proposals and their potential impact. We will always make clear the closing date for responses.
5. A person within Ofcom will be in charge of making sure we follow our own guidelines and aim to reach the largest possible number of people and organisations who may be interested in the outcome of our decisions. Ofcom's Consultation Champion is the main person to contact if you have views on the way we run our consultations.
6. If we are not able to follow any of these principles, we will explain why.

After the consultation

7. We think it is important that everyone who is interested in an issue can see other people's views, so we usually publish the responses on our website at regular intervals during and after the consultation period. After the consultation we will make our decisions and publish a statement explaining what we are going to do, and why, showing how respondents' views helped to shape these decisions.

A6. Consultation coversheet

Basic details

Consultation title:

To (Ofcom contact):

Name of respondent:

Representing (self or organisation/s):

Address (if not received by email):

Confidentiality

Please tick below what part of your response you consider is confidential, giving your reasons why

- > Nothing ☐
- > Name/contact details/job title ☐
- > Whole response ☐
- > Organisation ☐
- > Part of the response ☐

If you selected 'Part of the response', please specify which parts:

If you want part of your response, your name or your organisation not to be published, can Ofcom still publish a reference to the contents of your response (including, for any confidential parts, a general summary that does not disclose the specific information or enable you to be identified)?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Declaration

I confirm that the correspondence supplied with this cover sheet is a formal consultation response that Ofcom can publish. However, in supplying this response, I understand that Ofcom may need to publish all responses, including those which are marked as confidential, in order to meet legal obligations. If I have sent my response by email, Ofcom can disregard any standard e-mail text about not disclosing email contents and attachments.

Ofcom aims to publish responses at regular intervals during and after the consultation period. If your response is non-confidential (in whole or in part), and you would prefer us to publish your response only once the consultation has ended, please tick here.

Name

Signed (if hard copy)

A7. Consultation questions

Please tell us how you came across about this consultation.

- ☐ Email from Ofcom
- ☐ Saw it on social media
- ☐ Found it on Ofcom's website
- ☐ Found it on another website
- ☐ Heard about it on TV or radio
- ☐ Read about it in a newspaper or magazine
- ☐ Heard about it at an event
- ☐ Somebody told me or shared it with me
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Consultation question 1:

Do you agree with the proposed broadcast licensing priorities for the short to medium term? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 2:

Do you consider that the proposed broadcast licensing priorities for the short to medium term will provide sufficient provision for audiences? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 3:

For post-launch SSDAB multiplex coverage improvement or extension requests only, do you agree with our proposed change in approach to our application of the rule which restricts overlap with local muxes to 40% of the population already covered by the local mux (the “40% ceiling”)? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 4:

Do you agree with Ofcom’s analysis in section 3 and at Annex A1 of the existing broadcast licence types? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 5:

Do you agree with our assessment on the impact of our proposed broadcast licensing priorities for the short to medium term at Annex A3? Please give reasons for your answer.

Consultation question 6:

Do you have any other comments to make on the proposals?