

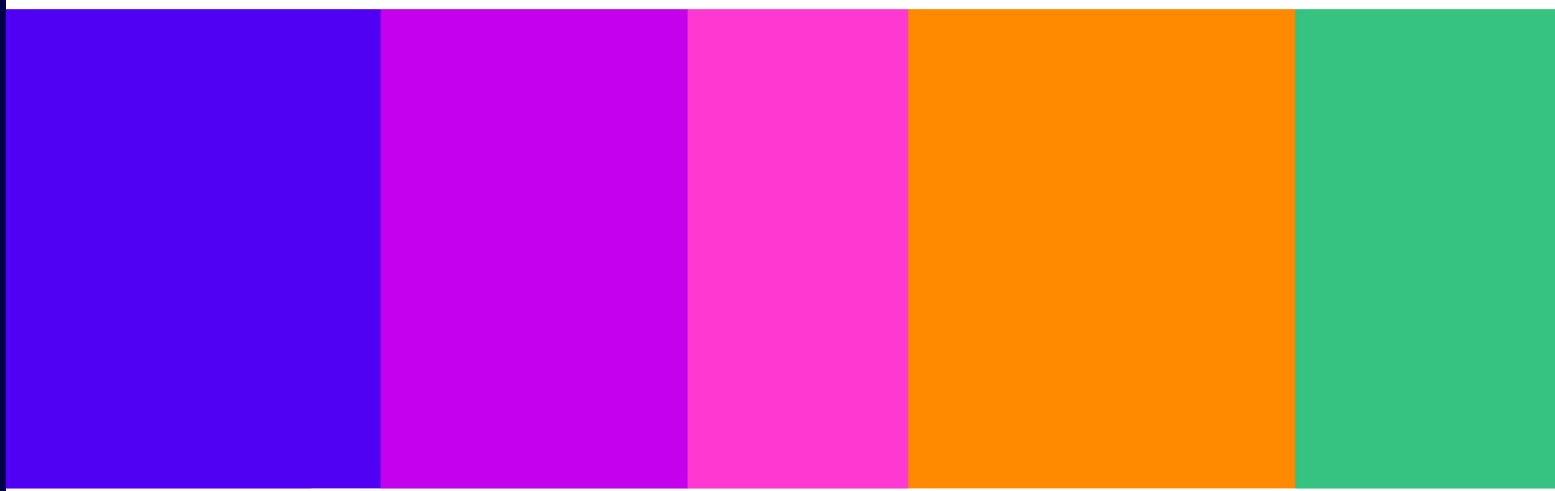
Small-scale DAB coverage change: Newcastle & Gateshead

Statement on request to vary the licensed area of the Newcastle & Gateshead small-scale radio multiplex

Statement

Published 02 June 2025

For more information on this publication, please visit [ofcom.org.uk](https://www.ofcom.org.uk)



Contents

Section

1. Overview	3
2. Process for changing a radio multiplex licensing area	4
3. The variation request.....	7

Annex

A1. Proposed change	10
A2. Impact assessments.....	19

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 area to be served by the Newcastle & Gateshead small-scale radio multiplex service.
- 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 13 May 2025, 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 have decided – 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 Tyneside Community Digital C.I.C. to vary the small-scale radio multiplex licence for Newcastle & Gateshead so as to change the area within which the service is required to be available.

2. Process for changing a radio multiplex licensing area

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:
- 2.15 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

2.16 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.

2.17 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.

3. The variation request

Proposed new technical plan

- 3.1 The licence to provide the Newcastle & Gateshead small-scale radio multiplex service was awarded to Tyneside Community Digital C.I.C. ('TCD') in June 2021. The multiplex launched in July 2022.
- 3.2 TCD has applied to vary its licence on the basis that it would like to improve coverage for listeners within its existing licensed area. It has supplied Ofcom with details of various locations across the licence area where it would like to improve the reliability of reception of the multiplex, most notably Blaydon and parts of Newcastle city centre.
- 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 an increase in transmitter powers which is predicted to provide a net increase in coverage of around 78,000 adults (aged 15+) on the currently licensed coverage area of 489,000 adults. This represents a 15.8% increase in population coverage (to 567,000 adults). No listeners who are currently served by the multiplex are anticipated to lose coverage under the revised plan.
- 3.4 Much of the additional coverage is outside the original advertised area, including a significant amount of coverage which falls inside the areas advertised for, and covered by, the Tynemouth & South Shields and Alnwick & Morpeth small-scale multiplexes.
- 3.5 Ofcom estimates the overall increase in coverage to the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex would include just under 34,000 adults who already receive coverage from the neighbouring Tynemouth & South Shields small-scale multiplex, with this increase primarily in parts of Hebburn, Boldon and North Shields. Ofcom estimates the increase would also include just under 13,000 adults who already receive coverage from the Alnwick & Morpeth multiplex, focused on smaller settlements south of Morpeth.
- 3.6 We consider the new coverage which overlaps with that of the Tynemouth & South Shields multiplex to be material and to constitute an extension to include an adjoining locality. As such it falls within the scope of section 54A of the Broadcasting Act, and therefore needs to be consulted upon before Ofcom can reach a decision.

Our preliminary view

- 3.7 As set out in paragraph 2.7, we cannot approve TCD'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 Newcastle & Gateshead small-scale multiplex currently serves.
- 3.8 In our consultation published on 15 April 2025, Ofcom's preliminary view was that we were satisfied on this point. This is primarily because we do not anticipate the change will result in households which currently have coverage losing it (there is not only a net coverage increase but no countervailing loss). However, we recognised that the increase in coverage could result in increased costs for the multiplex, and that any such increase in costs could result in higher costs for service providers. To this end, we said that we would particularly welcome responses to this consultation from current or prospective service providers.

- 3.9 As well as considering the request in relation to the above statutory criterion, we also have a number of policy criteria to 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.
- 3.10 Prior to publication of the consultation, we already determined that the extent of the new coverage was sufficient in scale to constitute an extension to adjoining licence areas (namely, Tynemouth & South Shields and Alnwick & Morpeth). However, in coming to a preliminary view on whether to approve TCD's request, we needed to determine whether the impact of the extended coverage was acceptable (or not).
- 3.11 Ofcom's preliminary view was that the overlapping coverage requested by the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex is not excessive. That is, we have considered whether it means that carriage on the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex is likely to be viewed by programme service providers as an alternative to taking carriage on the Tynemouth & South Shields or Alnwick & Morpeth multiplexes, such that the commercial viability of these multiplexes could be negatively impacted. The reasons for our preliminary view, as set out in the consultation, were as follows:

Tynemouth & South Shields

- 3.12 Whilst the requested extension would add parts of Hebburn, Boldon and North Shields which currently only have coverage from the Tynemouth & South Shields multiplex, the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex would continue to provide no coverage at all for listeners in many of the most significant population centres in the Tynemouth & South Shields coverage area, notably Tynemouth, South Shields and Whitley Bay. We therefore considered it to be unlikely that the extension would result in the Newcastle & Gateshead small-scale multiplex being seen as an alternative to the Tynemouth & South Shields multiplex for enough service providers materially to undermine the viability of the latter.

Alnwick & Morpeth

- 3.13 The extended Newcastle & Gateshead licence area would only reach some (mainly rural) parts of the Alnwick & Morpeth licence area that were not previously overlapped. It would not provide coverage to any of the main population centres in the Alnwick & Morpeth licence area, notably Alnwick, Ashington, Blyth and Morpeth. We therefore considered it to be very unlikely that the extension would result in the Newcastle & Gateshead small-scale multiplex being seen as an alternative to the Alnwick & Morpeth multiplex for enough service providers materially to undermine the viability of the latter.

Summary

- 3.14 As such, our preliminary view was that the proposed coverage change, whilst increasing overlap between the coverage areas, would not be sufficiently substantial to make carriage on the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex a genuine alternative for services wishing to broadcast to either the Tynemouth & South Shields or Alnwick & Morpeth licence areas, or to materially impact on the viability of those multiplexes.
- 3.15 Ofcom also provisionally considered that all the other technical requirements referred to in paragraphs 2.14 - 2.15 were met. For variation requests which are subject to consultation, we have further criteria to consider. These are listed in paragraph 2.16. We were

provisionally satisfied in relation to these too. The overall increase in coverage which would result from the power increase will improve the coverage and signal strength of the multiplex within its current licensed area (particularly in Newcastle city centre) and as such should enhance the licensee's ability to maintain the licensed service.

- 3.16 On balance, having considered the matters in paragraphs 2.7 and 2.14 to 2.16, our preliminary view was that it would be appropriate to exercise our discretion to vary the Newcastle & Gateshead licence in accordance with the request.

Consultation responses and Ofcom assessment

- 3.17 Ofcom received one response to the consultation, from Bauer Digital Radio Limited. This was neutral in principle about the plan to extend the coverage of the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex, but expressed concerns about potential interference (or 'hole punching') to their own local radio multiplex for Tyne & Wear resulting from the proposed power increase.
- 3.18 Our modelling of the coverage increase proposed by the Newcastle & Gateshead licensee indicates that there will be no impact upon the availability of Bauer's Tyne & Wear local multiplex in the area due to hole punching. Should this prove to be incorrect in practice, Ofcom can request that a hole punching assessment is carried out by the licensee and, potentially, require that appropriate mitigation measures be put in place.
- 3.19 For the above reasons, whilst noting that Bauer'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

- 3.20 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 Tyneside Community Digital C.I.C. to vary the small-scale radio multiplex licence for Newcastle & Gateshead so as to change the area within which the service is required to be available.

The overview section in Section 1 of this document is a simplified high-level summary only. The decision we have taken is set out in the full document.

A1. Proposed change

- A1.1 The licensee is proposing a power increase at both transmitter sites. The power of the Gateshead (Queen Elizabeth Hospital) transmitter would increase from 100W to 235W, while the power of the Newcastle (Blakelaw Flats) transmitter would increase from 100W to 175W. No other changes to the technical parameters at either site are proposed
- 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 building¹.
- A1.4 However, please note the following caveats:
- The maps are based on computer predictions rather than actual measurements, so is indicative only.
 - '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), although that level may not be adequate for receivers built to a poorer sensitivity, or be sufficient in every location.
 - 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.
 - The maps do not show where reception outside homes (e.g. along roads) may be possible.

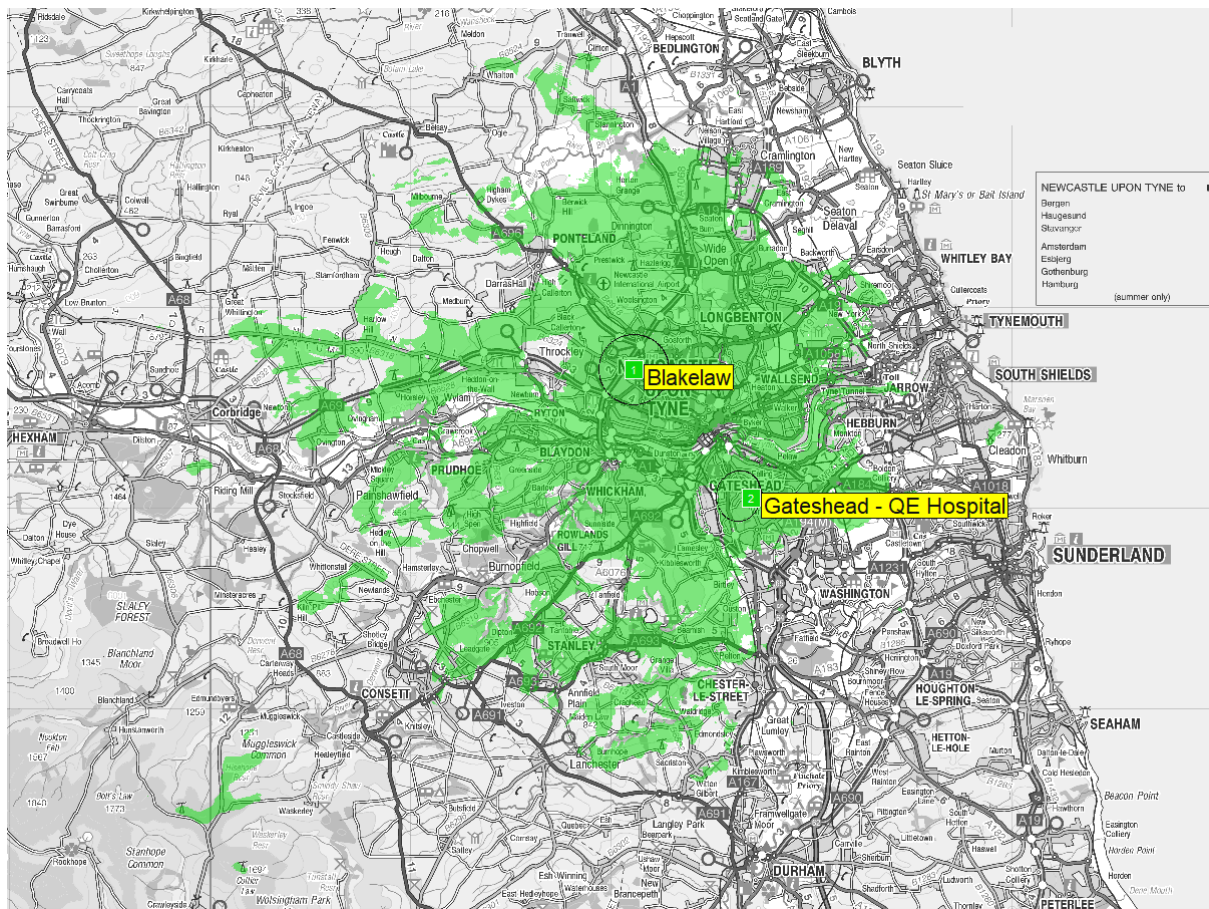
Coverage required by current licence

Currently licensed transmitter details

Site name	NGR	Site height	Power (W)	Aerial height	Aerial Pattern
Gateshead - QE2 Hospital	NZ 2698 6050	160m	100W	25m	
Newcastle - Blakelaw Flats	NZ 2114 6692	105m	100W	40m	Omnidirectional

¹ 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/technical/technical-policy/dab/dab_multiplex_licensees/)

Map of currently licensed coverage



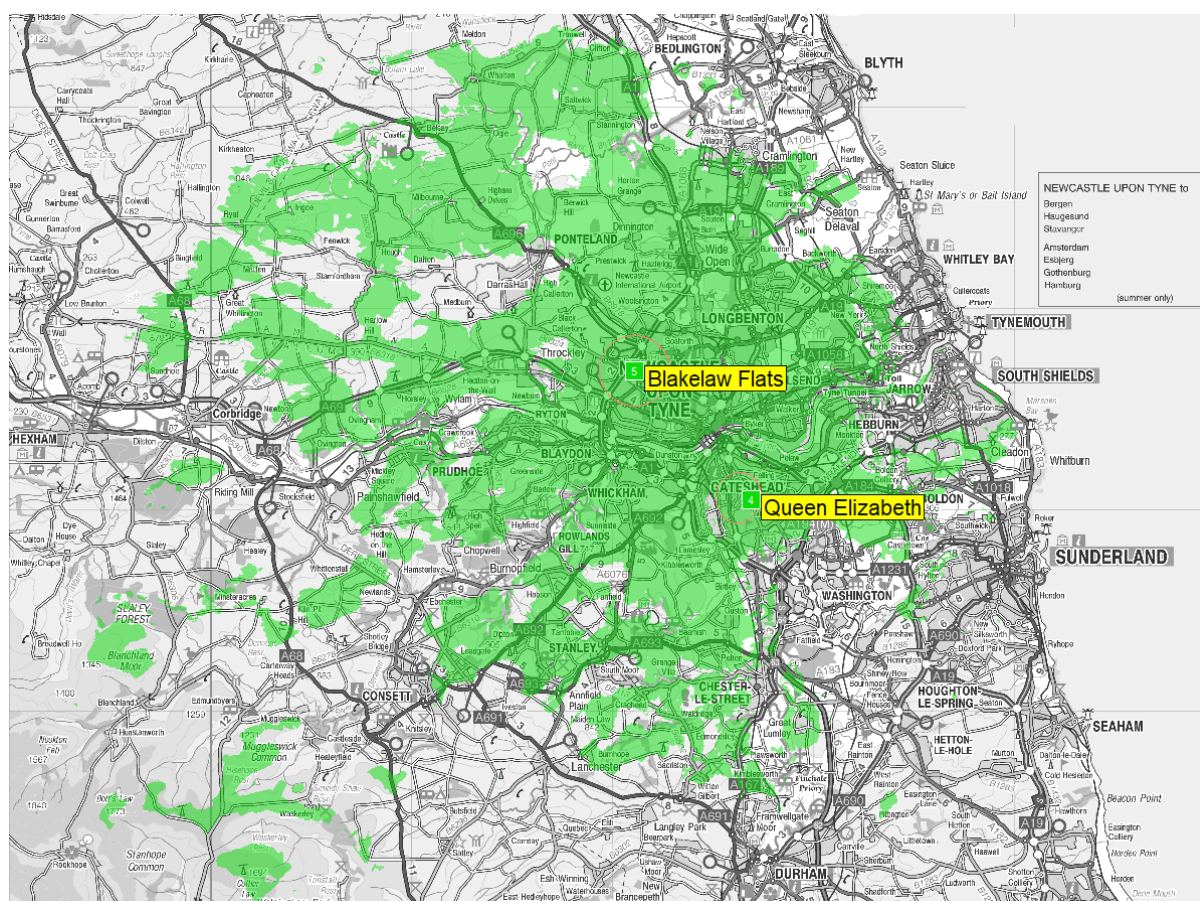
Coverage shown is for predicted indoor coverage (63dB μ V/m at 10m above ground level)

Coverage proposed by the licensee

Proposed transmitter details

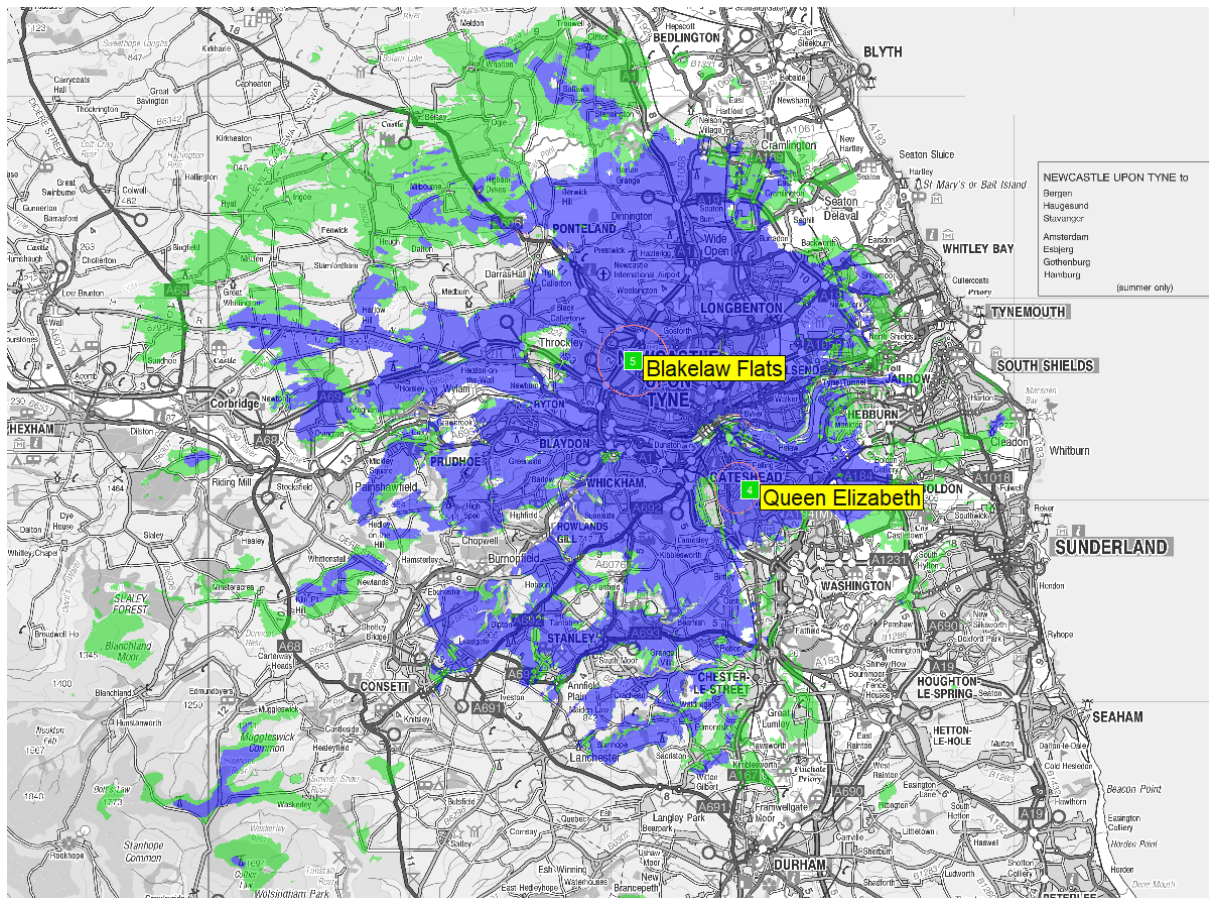
Site name	NGR	Site height	Power (W)	Aerial height	Aerial Pattern
Gateshead - QE2 Hospital	NZ 2698 6050	160m	235W	25m	
Newcastle - Blakelaw Flats	NZ 2114 6692	105m	175W	40m	Omnidirectional

Map of proposed coverage



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

Comparison of coverage

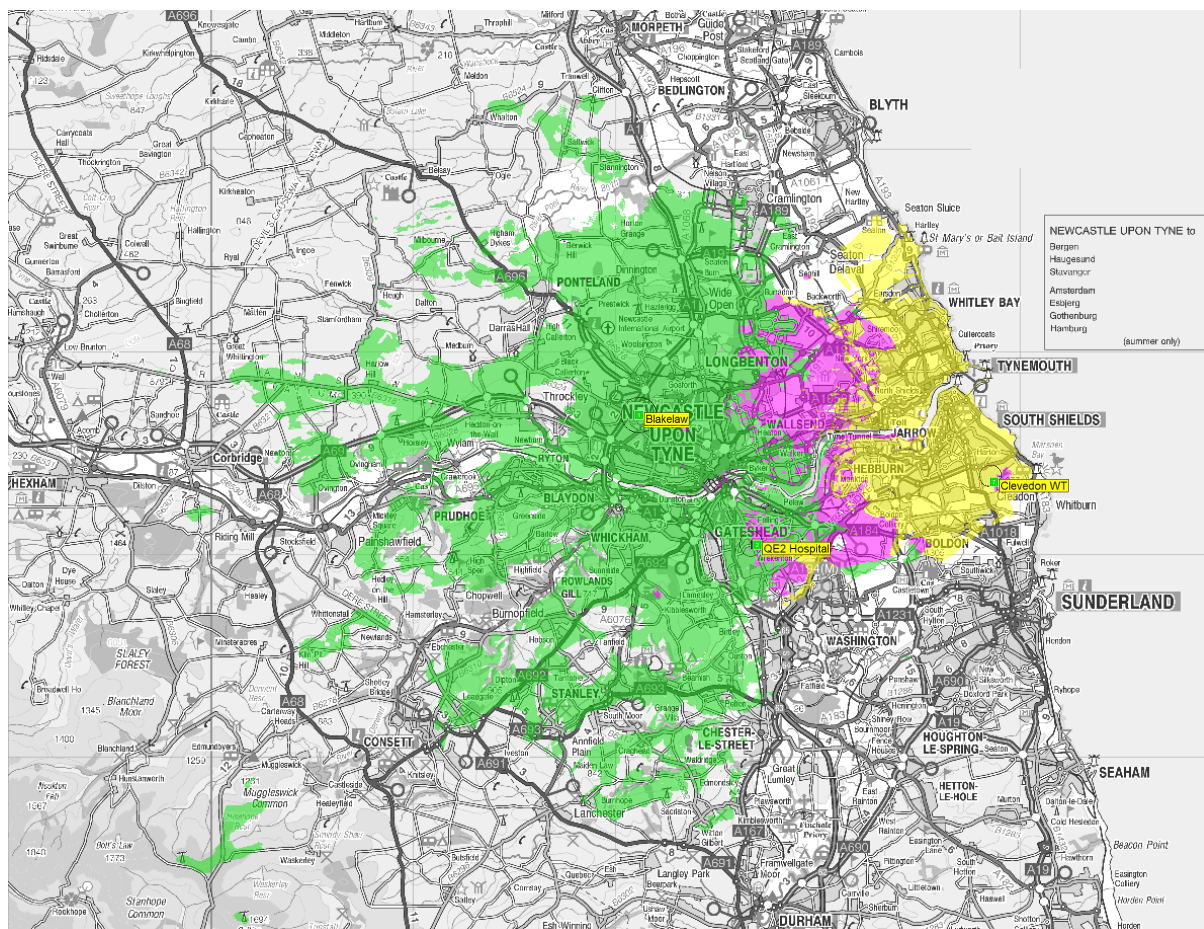


Coverage shown is for predicted indoor coverage (63dBμV/m at 10m above ground level)

Coverage summary table (adults 15+)

Population served by currently licensed coverage	489,000
Population served by proposed coverage	567,000
Net population change	78,000
Population retained (blue areas)	489,000
Population gained (green areas)	78,000
Population lost (red areas)	0

Current overlap with Tynemouth & South Shields multiplex

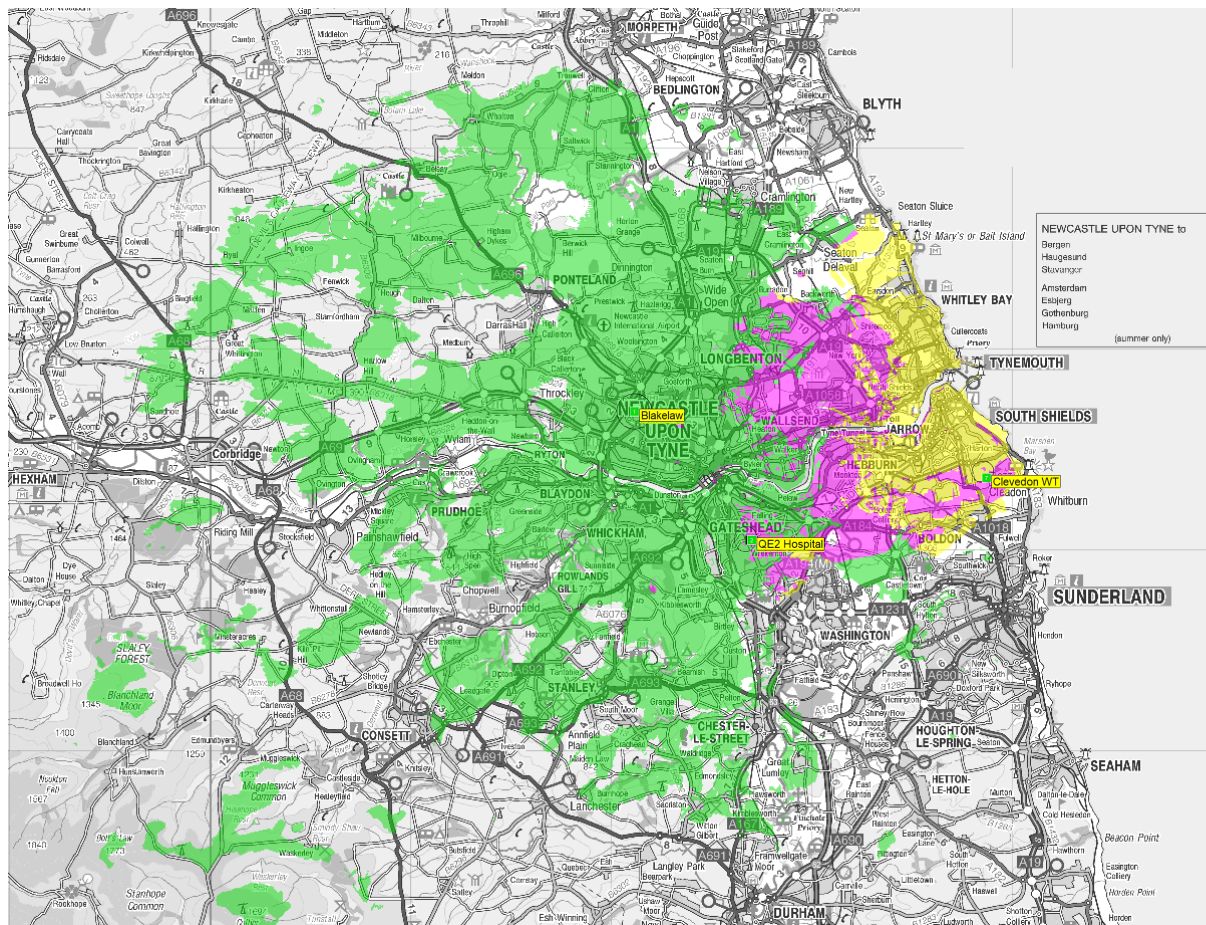


Green – Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex coverage

Yellow – Tynemouth & South Shields multiplex coverage

Pink – Areas of overlapping coverage between the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex and the Tynemouth & South Shields multiplex

Proposed overlap with Tynemouth & South Shields multiplex

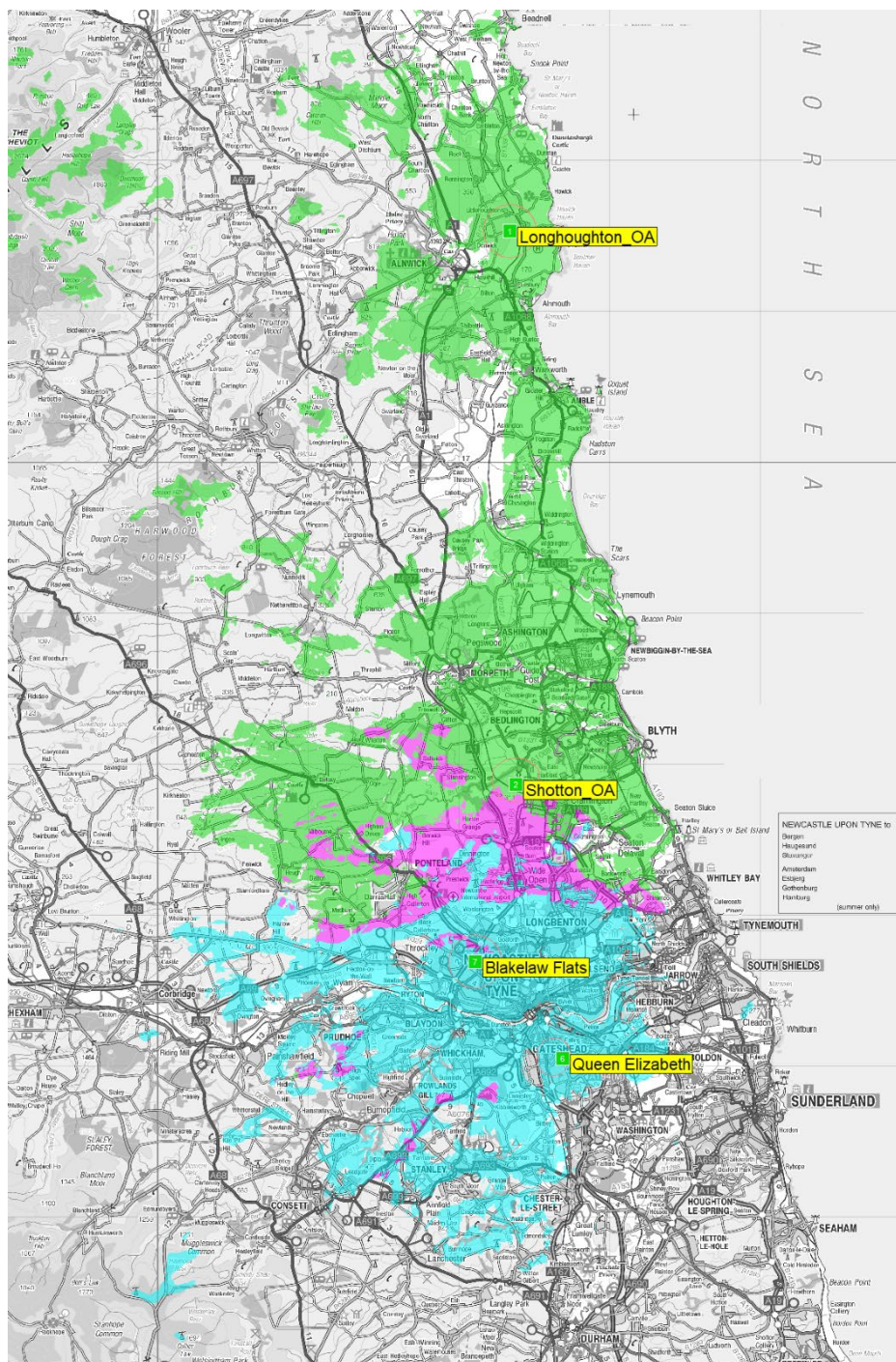


Green – Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex coverage (proposed)

Yellow – Tynemouth & South Shields multiplex coverage (current)

Pink – Areas of overlapping coverage between the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex and the Tynemouth & South Shields multiplex (proposed)

Current overlap with Alnwick & Morpeth multiplex

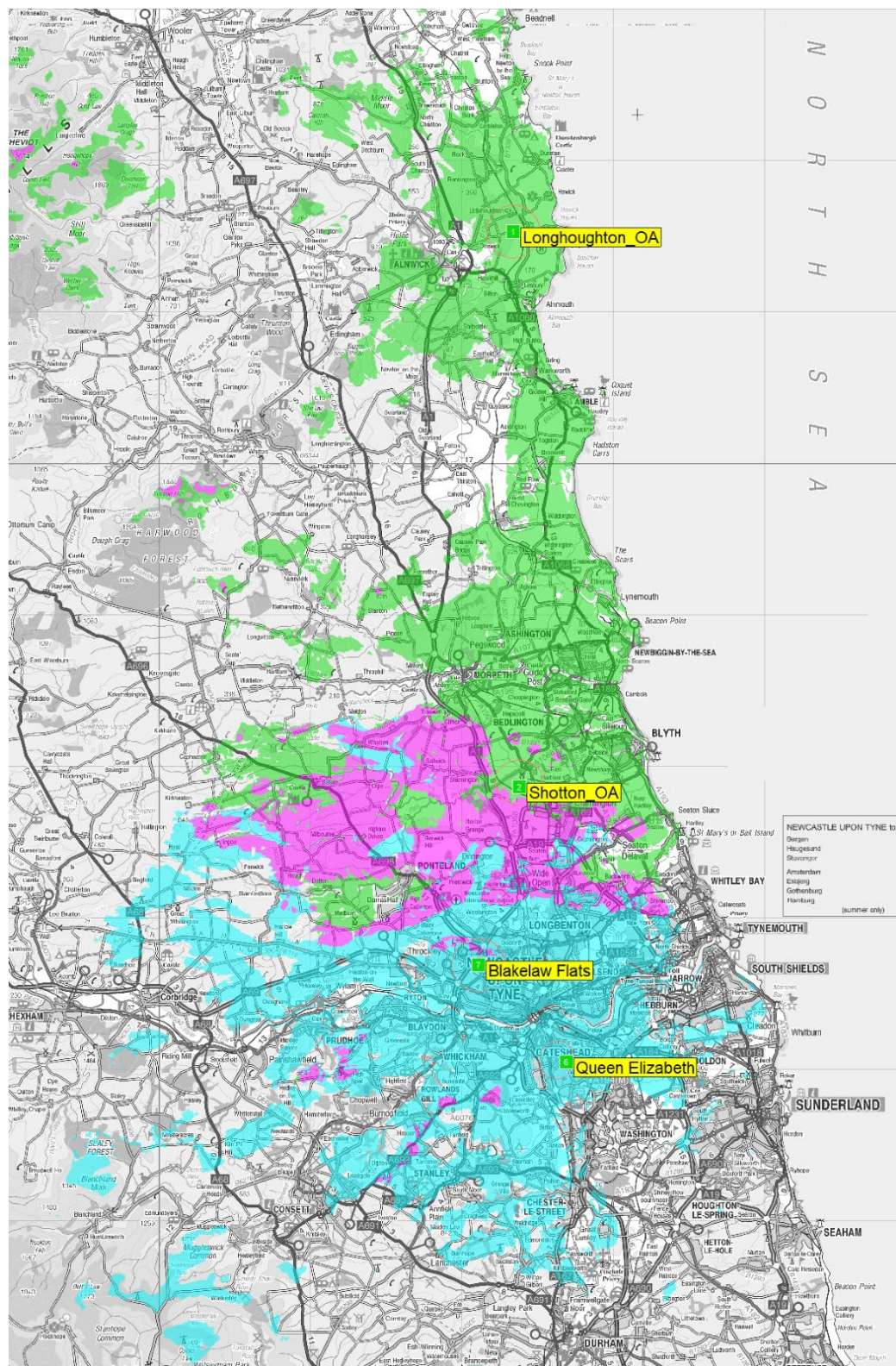


Turquoise – Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex coverage

Green – Alnwick & Morpeth multiplex coverage

Pink – Areas of overlapping coverage between the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex and the Alnwick & Morpeth multiplex.

Proposed overlap with Alnwick & Morpeth multiplex



Turquoise – Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex coverage (proposed)

Green – Alnwick & Morpeth multiplex coverage (current)

Pink – Areas of overlapping coverage between the Newcastle & Gateshead multiplex and the Alnwick & Morpeth multiplex (proposed)

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 In approving the request, we do not consider it will have any adverse impact on citizens and consumers. Rather, the increased transmitter power and extended coverage area should improve the reception and availability of digital sound programme services in the Newcastle & Gateshead area. Importantly, we noted that no existing listeners to services broadcasting on the multiplex will be disenfranchised, since there will be no losses of coverage.
- A2.3 There is some potential for the extension to impact on the economic viability of the neighbouring multiplexes for Tynemouth & South Shields and Alnwick & Morpeth. However, for the reasons set out in this statement, our view is that the extended coverage area will not have a significant negative impacts upon the viability of either of these multiplexes.

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, we do not consider that the planned changes will have an adverse impact on any of the citizens and consumers in the area. This is because no coverage will be lost as a result of the changes, and therefore the issue of whether there will be a different impact for different groups does not arise. We have considered whether the change may impact upon the commercial viability of the neighbouring multiplexes for Tynemouth & South Shields and Alnwick & Morpeth, and a consequential potential impact on the ability to establish radio services in those areas advancing equality of opportunity and fostering good relations. However, we are satisfied that the extended coverage area will not have a material impact upon the viability of the small-scale radio multiplexes in these neighbouring areas.