

Friday, 29 June 2007

ARI's Response to the Future of Radio Consultation
Document issued by Ofcom

Ofcom issued a consultation document titled The Future of Radio on 17th April 2007. The closing date for responses to this document is 29th June 2007.

The following are the views of Absolute Radio International (ARI). ARI is the owner of two local licenses in Oxfordshire (Oxford's FM107.9 and JACK fm – Oxfordshire).

It is also an active participant in the current round of local DAB licence awards with the JACK fm brand in Herts, Beds & Bucks, Northants, N. Cheshire, and Gloucestershire

General Comments

- ARI is delighted that Ofcom has issued this important document
- ARI believes that most of the issues facing the UK radio industry have been correctly identified in the document
- ARI supports the work of the Ofcom in finding correct solutions to these challenges
- Indeed, ARI would encourage Ofcom to be as progressive and proactive as possible in terms of the timing of any future relaxation of the current rules
- ARI also fully supports the further development of digital radio in the UK

Specific Comments

Content Regulation

- In terms of Ofcom's proposal to reduce the obligation of the number of locally originated programmes for smaller stations (to 4 hours for stations with populations under 100,000 people), we believe that Ofcom should consider going further and that this provision should be;
 - 4 hours for stations under 250,000 population
 - 8 hours for stations under 500,000 population
- We support Ofcom's suggestion that regulation of content on analogue commercial radio and on DAB digital radio should be aligned once listening accounted for by digital platforms reaches 33% of population proposed by Ofcom



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- We support the idea that analogue format regulation be relaxed so that these formats contain only the same level of detail as DAB formats once listening accounted for by digital platforms reaches 33% of population as proposed by Ofcom
- We support the idea that Ofcom's ability to be allowed to look at the provision of local content across all local stations in an area on a platform neutral basis (analogue and digital radio basis), should only become relevant once listening to digital reaches at least 50% of all listening.

Radio Ownership

- We support the suggestion that the ownership rules regarding analogue commercial radio and DAB digital radio into a single set of rules at the earliest time, possibly once overall listening to DAB reaches 33%
- We support the idea that there should be a single set of ownership rules for defined ownership areas which would apply across analogue and DAB platforms, once the relevant digital listening threshold is met
- We support the suggestion that DAB multiplex ownership rules could be changed so that no one group can control more than one multiplex designed to cover the same area
- We do not believe that cross media ownership rules should be based on defined ownership areas

Spectrum Availability

- We fully support the suggestion that Ofcom be given the powers to increase the licensed areas of existing and future DAB local multiplex licences.
- We do not agree with Ofcom's suggestions of appropriate review dates for any possible FM analogue switch-off (either 2012 or once DAB listening accounts for 50% of all listening). We should suggest this figure, if needed at all should be at least 75% due the longer time it will take to convert the final 25% of potential listeners. Bearing this in mind, we feel that is unlikely that FM will ever be a redundant wavelength.
- We believe that it is too early to decide that existing analogue licenses awarded under the current statutory framework should be granted with an expiry date of at least 31 December 2015.
- We believe that it is too early to decide if the 12-year renewal provision for local and national analogue licensees should be removed.
- We support the suggestion that Ofcom be given power to extend all existing licensees for an indefinite period, so as to achieve common end dates for all licensees

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Licensing

- We support the suggestion that licenses should be able to be licensed on any spectrum in a technology neutral way

Other Comments

- We believe that smaller analogue stations with existing power of less than 500w should be allowed to apply for an increase in power to compete with local BBC and ILR effectively, where no obvious interference occurs

Absolute Radio International

JUNE 2007