

The DRDB (Digital Radio Development Bureau) is the radio industry trade body for DAB digital radio, funded and supported by BBC, Digital One, GCap Media, EMAP Digital Radio, and MXR (Chrysalis, GMG, GCap Media and UBC). The DRDB's task is to ensure DAB digital radio's wide accessibility and swift adoption in the UK with consistent and effective marketing.

The DRDB welcomes Ofcom's Future of Radio report and broadly endorses much of what it proposes with respect to DAB digital radio. It appears that Ofcom has taken note of the growing DAB market and is preparing to set in place the criteria for analogue switch-off some years down the line. We believe this is an important step. Although there are still hurdles to be cleared before switch-off can be achieved, it is vital for all in the DAB chain to know that these issues are under consideration and will be dealt with.

In 2005 the DRDB commissioned a report on Digital Radio Switchover from the Rt Hon Chris Smith who highlighted several obstacles to an all-digital environment, something he deemed "a desirable objective." Chief among these was the "incomplete coverage of local radio services". The roll-out of new local and regional multiplexes currently underway will do much to mitigate this issue. However, once the available spectrum is filled, we believe there will remain a number of small local radio stations that either cannot find space on a digital multiplex, or cannot afford to make the migration. This is a serious barrier to analogue switch-off and, although it is acknowledged in the Future of Radio report, the DRDB would like to see a clearer path for small radio services in order that the entire radio industry can work together for a digital future. As long as some local commercial and BBC radio services are digitally disenfranchised, analogue switch-off remains problematic.

Five million DAB digital radios have been sold since 2003, but the continuing growth of sales, and thus listening, depends on consumer awareness of and interest in the new services on offer. This, in turn, relies on broadcasters developing compelling content and then investing in marketing new stations. All of which takes money. As long as broadcasters are forced to pay to be on multiple platforms, this cash is going to remain hard to find. It is therefore the DRDB's view that a strategy for analogue switch-off is paramount for the health of the industry.

Responding to Ofcom's previous consultation, the DRDB said: "The DRDB asks that a clearly defined digital migration strategy that ultimately leads to a digital only medium, and the resultant end of delivering services by analogue technology, be laid out," and we would reiterate this now.

The DRDB welcomes Ofcom's proposals to amend the existing legislation to bring analogue services in line with DAB services in terms of format and content restriction. We also believe it is sensible to bring together the ownership rules regarding analogue commercial radio and DAB digital radio into a single, less restrictive set of rules as more and more people choose the DAB platform. Overall, less regulation and the simplification of rules can only help to broaden consumer choice, to strengthen the radio industry and to drive digital take-up.

On the subject of DAB+, the DRDB broadly supports and endorses Ofcom's stance on the eventual roll-out of DAB+ services once there is a substantial base of products in homes that are compatible with both DAB and DAB+.

There are now over five million DAB radios in UK homes; 20% of adults live in a DAB household (which equates to 10 million people); penetration is at 18% of all UK homes; 21% of all listening hours are digital (with more than half attributed to DAB); 72% of the population knows what DAB digital radio is; nearly 20% of all radio products sold are DAB; DAB listeners consumer 12.8% more radio than average; and the DAB radio set industry is now worth over £157 million a year.

By 2010 figures suggest 50% of UK homes could be enjoying DAB digital radio. With the advent of a new national multiplex and the increased marketing promotion this brings, and a dozen or so local and regional muxes over the coming months, coverage and choice will also increase. As digital listening eclipses analogue, we expect to see more and more retailers de-stocking analogue products. Manufacturers and broadcasters are working together to deliver new features that fit with consumers' changing listening habits. New form factors will include an iPod plug-in device, DAB in docking stations, mobile phones, mobile multi-media devices, more MP3 and MP4 players and, potentially, any device that comes with a screen.

Some leading retailers have already de-ranged analogue products in certain form factors and the DRDB believes Ofcom should monitor this trend closely. As digital replaces analogue on the shelf, and consumers find it harder to buy analogue-only products, switch-off could become an "organic" process.

Radio remains a vibrant and much-loved medium in a competitive and increasingly digital entertainment landscape. This is a healthy, growing industry with huge potential for the future. It must be free to explore that potential, to be innovative with audio content and data provision and to deliver richer radio in more places.