

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Corby & Kettering

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Corby & Kettering to Kettering and Corby Broadcasting Company Limited.

In considering the applications it receives for small-scale radio multiplex licences, Ofcom is required to have regard to each of the statutory criteria set out in section 51(2) of the Broadcasting Act 1996 as modified by the Small-scale Radio Multiplex and Community Digital Radio Order 2019. These are as follows:

1. the extent of the coverage area (within the area or locality specified in the Ofcom notice inviting applications) proposed to be achieved by the applicant in the technical plan submitted in its application; (section 51(2)(a))
2. the ability of the applicant to establish the proposed service; (section 51(2)(c))
3. the desirability of awarding the licence to an applicant that:
 - a. is a person providing or proposing to provide a community digital sound programme service in that area or locality, or
 - b. has as a participant a person providing or proposing to provide a community digital sound programme service in that area or locality; (section 51(2)(ca))
4. the extent to which there is evidence that, amongst persons providing or proposing to provide community or local digital sound programme services in that area or locality, there is a demand for, or support for, the provision of the proposed service; (section 51(2)(f)) and
5. whether, in contracting or offering to contract with persons providing or proposing to provide community or local digital sound programme services, the applicant has acted in a manner calculated to ensure fair and effective competition in the provision of those services. (section 51(2)(g)).

The legislation does not rate these requirements in order of priority, but it may be that Ofcom will regard one or more of the criteria as being particularly important in view of the characteristics of the licence to be awarded and the applications for it.

Assessment

On 19 April 2024, Ofcom published a notice inviting applications for licences to provide small-scale radio multiplex services in localities including Corby & Kettering.

By the closing-date of 18 July 2024, Ofcom had received two applications for Corby & Kettering. These were from Corby & Kettering SSDAB Limited and Kettering and Corby Broadcasting Company

Limited ("KCBC"). Copies of the non-confidential parts of the applications were made available for public scrutiny on the Ofcom website, and public comment was invited as required under section 50(7).

Ofcom colleagues assessed the detail of the applications, including carrying out an assessment of the technical plans required to be submitted as part of all applications. The decision in relation to Corby & Kettering was made by a panel of Ofcom decision makers which convened on 26 March 2025. They carefully considered the applications, public comments received, and professional advice from Ofcom colleagues. They applied the statutory criteria in reaching their decision on whether and to whom to award a licence. Reasons for their decision to award a licence to KCBC are summarised below.

In relation to section 51(2)(a), the applicant proposed using two transmitters to provide its service. Ofcom calculations indicate that this would result in just over 71% of the adult population in the advertised licence area being able to receive the service. Ofcom's coverage predictions indicated that the proposed small-scale radio multiplex service would be available to under 40% of the population in the licensed areas of the overlapping Northamptonshire and Leicestershire local radio multiplexes, and overspill outside the advertised area was predicted to be well under 30% of the population of the advertised area. Ofcom therefore considered no mitigations were required to comply with these thresholds. Ofcom considered mitigation would be required to address potential co-channel and adjacent channel interference. This would be likely to reduce coverage slightly to approximately 68%. Decision makers considered that predicted coverage was good in the context of an advertised area consisting of several towns. This included robust coverage within the largest population centres of Corby and Kettering, albeit this would not reach the east of the advertised area including the towns of Thrapston and Oundle.

In relation to section 51(2)(c), Ofcom considered the applicant's financial and business plan, technical plan, the timetable for coverage roll-out, and evidence of relevant expertise and experience. Decision makers noted that the business plan appeared reasonably robust, including commitments to up-front funding from directors of KCBC. Whilst site access discussions were ongoing, the chosen sites appeared appropriate and underpinned the business case by providing good coverage of the area's two largest towns. The applicant included participants with experience in the radio sector in the local area and in small-scale multiplexes. Overall, decision makers had a reasonably good level of confidence in the applicant's ability to establish the service within the 18-month period allowed by legislation.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), Ofcom noted that the applicant does not have as a participant a person proposing to provide a community digital sound programme service in the advertised area. We noted that involvement of such a person is a desirable feature but not a necessity for applicants.

In relation to section 51(2)(f), Ofcom considered evidence of demand or support from persons providing or proposing to provide community or local digital sound programme services (C-DSP and DSP services) in the advertised area. Expressions of interest had been received from four prospective C-DSP services and four other DSP services. Decision makers noted that, whilst interest from the community sector was positive in the context of reserved capacity for four services, those expressing an interest included two existing analogue community services based outside the advertised area that would need to establish studios in the locality to establish as C-DSP services. Additionally, it included an analogue community radio service inside the area, Corby Radio, which was also a participant in the other application for Corby & Kettering, and decision makers noted it would be important for KCBC to seek to work closely with that service following award to ensure its availability

on the multiplex when launched. Overall, however, decision makers considered this represented a reasonably good level of demand and support for the applicant's proposed service in the context of the advertised area.

In relation to section 51(2)(g) and based on the evidence received, Ofcom was satisfied that the applicant had, in contracting or offering to contract with persons providing or proposing to provide community or local digital sound programme services, acted in a manner calculated to ensure fair and effective competition in the provision of those services.

It is noted that the award of a licence does not confer on the awardee the right to implement all elements of the technical plan submitted to Ofcom as part of the successful application. Ofcom will treat proposals in that plan, on the basis of which the award was made, as things the successful applicant has committed to achieve within the 18-month period allowed between award and launch. However, for spectrum planning reasons, Ofcom may also require amendments to proposals between award and licence grant.

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