

# Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Ballymena

## Background

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Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Ballymena to NIDAB 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

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On 10 September 2025, Ofcom published a notice inviting applications for licences to provide small-scale radio multiplex services in localities including Ballymena.

By the closing-date of 10 December 2025, Ofcom had received one application for Ballymena. This was from NIDAB Limited ("NIDAB"). Copies of the non-confidential parts of the application were

made available for public scrutiny on the Ofcom website, and public comment was invited as required under section 50(7) although no comments were received.

Ofcom colleagues assessed the detail of the application, including carrying out an assessment of the technical plan required to be submitted as part of all applications. The decision in relation to Ballymena was made at an Ofcom decision meeting on 20 March 2026. The meeting carefully considered the application and professional advice from Ofcom colleagues involved in assessing the application. The statutory criteria were applied to reach a decision on whether to award a licence to the sole applicant. Reasons for the decision to award a licence to NIDAB are summarised below.

In relation to section 51(2)(a), the applicant proposed using one transmitter to provide its service. Ofcom calculations indicate that this would result in just under 54% 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 well under 40% of the population in the licensed area of the overlapping Northern Ireland local radio multiplex, and there was not expected to be coverage overspill outside the advertised area. Field strength towards the land border with the Republic of Ireland was considered to have been minimised as required in Ofcom's 10 September 2025 notice, and no further mitigations to address outgoing interference were considered to be necessary. Whilst relatively modest in percentage terms and did not reach the margins of the advertised area, Ofcom noted it included robust cover of the town of Ballymena itself.

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. Ofcom noted that although use of a single transmitter site resulted in some limitations in coverage, it also reduced likely complexity and cost in establishing the service. Ofcom also noted that the application brought together participants in the application with strong experience of establishing small-scale multiplexes and of the radio sector more broadly in Northern Ireland. Ofcom therefore concluded there was a good prospect of the service being established within the 18-month period allowed by legislation.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), NIDAB itself proposes to provide a C-DSP service in the advertised area. Whilst this is not an existing service, a similar service was established on the Belfast small-scale multiplex in which some participants in this application were involved, and Ofcom considered there was a reasonable prospect of it being available on the multiplex in due course.

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. In addition to its own proposed C-DSP service, the applicant provided evidence of demand and support from one C-DSP service (Fuse FM), and 15 other DSP services. Ofcom noted that some expressions of interest were from services based in the Republic of Ireland and as such carriage is dependent on further implementation of change set out in section 46 of the Media Act 2024. Nevertheless, this represents a very good level of demand and support in the context of a relatively small advertised area, reflecting the strong background of participants in the application in the radio sector in Northern Ireland.

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. As noted above, the level of interest demonstrated is evidence of good outreach to prospective services by the applicant.

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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