

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Barnsley

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Barnsley to Barnsley Community Media CIC.

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

By the closing-date of 10 December 2025, Ofcom had received one application for Barnsley. This was from Barnsley Community Media CIC ("BCM"). 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 Barnsley 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 BCM 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 under 78% 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 South Yorkshire, Leeds, and Bradford local radio multiplexes, and overspill outside the advertised area was predicted to be under 30% of the population of the advertised area. No further mitigations to address outgoing interference were considered to be necessary. Whilst the proposed technical plan did not reach the margins of the advertised area, Ofcom noted this amounted to good coverage of the advertised area including robust coverage of Barnsley and nearby towns.

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, while projected costs were relatively high, evidence of funding had been provided. Directors had experience running programme services on the neighbouring Sheffield & Rotherham multiplex, and had engaged an experienced technical contractor. 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), BCM itself proposes to provide a C-DSP service in the advertised area. Whilst this is not an existing service, and this affects the likelihood of it being available on the multiplex from launch, the intention to provide a C-DSP is viewed positively in respect of this award criterion.

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 did not provide evidence of demand and support from other C-DSP services, but did provide evidence from nine other DSP services, eight in the form of heads of terms indicating discussions were well advanced. Ofcom noted that the lack of interest from the community radio sector was somewhat disappointing and would be an area the applicant should seek to progress between award and launch given the reservation of capacity for at least five such services on the multiplex. However, there was a good level of support from the commercial sector.

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.

April 2026