

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Cookstown & Dungannon

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Cookstown & Dungannon 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

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

By the closing-date of 10 December 2025, Ofcom had received one application for Cookstown & Dungannon. 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 Cookstown & Dungannon was made at an Ofcom decision meeting on 28 May 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 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 well under 40% of the population in the licensed area of the overlapping Northern Ireland local radio multiplex, and indeed that would also be the case for the combined overlap of all four NIDAB multiplexes with the Northern Ireland local multiplex assuming all successfully proceed to launch. Overspill outside the advertised area was predicted to be approximately 80%, which significantly exceeds the threshold level of overspill being not more than 30% of the population of the advertised area. However, Ofcom considered that this could be reduced to below 30% through a relatively straightforward power reduction for one of the two proposed transmitters, and that this would reduce coverage within the advertised area to just under 71%. Further mitigations were unlikely to be required to address any hole-punching or interference issues, although further discussions may be required between Ofcom and the Republic of Ireland regulator, ComReg, regarding field strengths close to the border near the town of Monaghan. Ofcom considered that this represented a good level of coverage, including robust coverage of several key population centres including Cookstown, Dungannon and Magherafelt.

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 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. The transmitter sites are operated by a company owned by a participant in and director of the applicant, meaning funding requirements were relatively modest and evidence was provided such funding was available. Ofcom therefore concluded there was a very 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 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, 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 a good level of 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.

June 2026