

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: Skye & Lochalsh

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for Skye & Lochalsh to Craoladh Digiteach Ionadail 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 Skye & Lochalsh.

By the closing-date of 10 December 2025, Ofcom had received one application for Skye & Lochalsh. This was from Craoladh Digiteach Ionadail Limited (“CDI”). 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 Skye & Lochalsh 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 CDI 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 40% of the adult population in the advertised licence area being able to receive the service. The advertised area is in a part of Scotland which is not served by a local radio multiplex and as such Ofcom's coverage predictions indicated there would be no coverage overlap with such a multiplex. Negligible overspill was predicted outside the advertised area, and no further mitigations were considered necessary to address any hole-punching or interference issues. Ofcom noted that predicted coverage is relatively modest in percentage terms and, given the sparse population within the advertised area, the multiplex would serve only a very low number of households. However, the plans would provide good coverage of the town of Portree, the largest settlement on the Isle of Skye and Ofcom further noted that the area was unserved by either a local radio multiplex service or any of the UK national multiplexes. As such, the proposed small-scale multiplex service would potentially provide a very useful addition for the households served and for radio services wishing to cover the area. Ofcom therefore considered coverage to be sufficient to justify award to the sole applicant.

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 costs of establishing the service were significant relative to the limited coverage. This, together with the limited evidence of interest from service providers (see below), raised material questions over viability and the likelihood of the service being established within the statutory timeline. However, the applicant's owner has a clear commitment to community radio in the locality and good technical experience. Overall, Ofcom concluded there was sufficient prospect of the service being established within the 18-month period allowed by legislation to justify award to the sole applicant, particularly given the lack of existing multiplex coverage noted above and potential benefits of providing coverage for people in the advertised area.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), the applicant proposes to provide three C-DSP services in the advertised area. These are not existing services and there are further hurdles to establishing them such as the requirement for a C-DSP to have a studio in the coverage area (noting the same services are also listed as proposed C-DSPs in other applications). Whilst these hurdles limited the prospect of all three services being available at launch as C-DSPs, especially in the context of an area with a low population, Ofcom nonetheless welcomed the ambition of CDI to provide community services, particularly serving the Gaelic language speaking community.

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. As well as the three proposed C-DSP services, the applicant provided evidence of demand and support from one other prospective DSP service. Ofcom noted that this reflected a very modest level of interest, albeit in the context of a very small population

coverage. However, the fact there is neither an existing local multiplex service in the area nor coverage from the BBC National multiplex provided scope to develop interest between award and launch. Ofcom noted that the applicant had itself said limited outreach had been carried out, but it would be important for CDI to work on this given the viability challenges presented by the small population coverage.

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, however, limited expressions of interest reflected limited outreach, and further work would be needed between award and launch to support the viability of the proposed service.

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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