

Small-scale radio multiplex licence award: South Hams

Background

Ofcom has decided to award a new small-scale radio multiplex licence for South Hams to Stellaria Media 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 South Hams.

By the closing-date of 10 December 2025, Ofcom had received one application for South Hams. This was from Stellaria Media Limited ("Stellaria"). 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).

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 South Hams was made at an Ofcom decision meeting on 28 May 2026. The meeting carefully considered the application, public comment received, 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 Stellaria 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 approximately 4.5% 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 Exeter, Torbay & North Devon local radio multiplex, 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 the overlap and overspill thresholds. It also considered that mitigations were unlikely to be necessary to address hole punching or interference. Ofcom noted this represented a very low level of coverage within the advertised area, focused entirely on the town of Totnes and not on other significant population centres including Salcombe and Kingsbridge. We therefore carefully considered whether or not it would be appropriate to make an award in light of our general duties under the Communications Act 2003. Of particular relevance is that Ofcom has a duty, in carrying out its functions, to secure efficient use of electromagnetic spectrum and availability of a range of radio services calculated to appeal to a variety of tastes and interests. In relation to the first of these, Ofcom noted that several localities in south west England had not received applications in the eight planned rounds of small-scale multiplex licensing, meaning there should be sufficient spectrum availability in future should there be interest in establishing a multiplex serving towns not covered within the advertised area. In relation to the latter, it was relevant that the sole shareholder in the applicant, as noted below, already provides an analogue community radio service in Totnes and had secured expressions of interest from other prospective services in the area. Additionally, the coverage represented a cohesive, contiguous area centred on Totnes and an adult population of just under 7,000 would be served, which may be sufficient to be of interest to further services. On balance, Ofcom considered that coverage was sufficient in the particular circumstances of the case to justify an 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 although the choice of a single transmission site focused entirely on providing coverage of the town of Totnes resulted in very low coverage of the wider advertised area (as noted above), this simplicity and use of an established site significantly reduced the cost and complexity of establishing the service. As noted above, the applicant is also the provider of an existing analogue community radio service with a clear commitment to radio in Totnes, and had provided evidence of funding. Ofcom therefore concluded there was a reasonable prospect of the service being established within the 18-month period allowed by legislation.

In relation to section 51(2)(ca), Ofcom noted that the sole shareholder in the applicant company intends to provide a C-DSP service on the multiplex which is an existing analogue community radio

service, Soundart Radio, which therefore has a very strong prospect of being available on the multiplex from launch. The applicant itself intends to provide a second C-DSP service, albeit this is not an existing service.

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 its own proposed C-DSP services, the application lists five other prospective C-DSP services, two of which are online services and one an analogue community radio service (albeit slightly outside the proposed coverage area). Ofcom noted that this represented a very good level of interest from the community sector, albeit it would be important to extend outreach to the commercial radio sector to secure the long term viability of the multiplex.

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.

June 2026