

Press release: Government to help commercial and community radio to go digital

There are currently around 400 commercial and community radio stations that are limited to broadcasting to small geographic areas on analogue (FM/MW) frequencies under outdated regulations. The new approach means these stations will be able to reach a wider audience to the areas they serve on digital radio.

Over 60 per cent of households now own a digital radio and the changes are designed to encourage a widespread rollout of small radio networks, within county areas, on a Digital Audio Broadcast (DAB) platform.

Digital Minister Matt Hancock said:

Local radio is much loved and vitally important as a source of objective and in touch local news. As more power is devolved locally, and as local newspapers struggle, local radio's role in the community is becoming more and more critical. So we are working hard with stations and listeners to make sure the rules are up to date, and give local radio the chance to use new digital technology to reach audiences, new and longstanding, old and young. Today's publication marks another step forward in that work. I'm very grateful to everyone who has worked so hard to make this progress.

Ford Ennals, Chief Executive Officer at Digital Radio UK said:

We welcome publication of the DCMS consultation on small-scale DAB which is an important enabling technology that can help hundreds of local commercial and community stations broadcast on DAB for the first time. This consultation is particularly important as there is much work still to be done to fully consider the best use of the limited spectrum available and how small-scale can work most efficiently alongside existing local and national DAB multiplexes to help maximise the benefits to listeners.

The Government will now consult on the best approach for a licensing process that is appropriate for small scale DAB radio multiplexes, with the aim of having a new licensing arrangements in place by the end of the year. [The consultation](#) will run for 8 weeks, and closes on the 28 February 2018.

Ash Elford, Digital Development Manager, Angel Radio, who runs the small-scale multiplex in Portsmouth, said:

After over two years of successfully broadcasting local DAB services to Portsmouth, it is good to see a process for the full-time licencing of many more local multiplexes for cities and towns starting to take shape. We hope that the successes we have achieved so far with technical innovations and broadcasting smaller commercial, niche and community services can be replicated across the UK as soon as possible.

David Duffy, Director, Niocast Digital, who run Manchester's small-scale DAB multiplex, said:

Niocast welcomes the small-scale DAB consultation as an important next step in the development of digital radio across the UK.

Dean Kavanagh of Switch Radio and Multiplex Manager, BrumDAB SSDAB in Birmingham, said:

We welcome the news of the upcoming DCMS Small Scale DAB consultation. As we have seen already, this additional layer of DAB has brought with it significant benefits for listeners – unlocking a world of new and exciting programming that otherwise would not have had a home. This consultation represents the first steps towards providing this exciting platform for all.

Notes to Editors

1. DAB radio services are broadcast as multiplexes. A radio multiplex consists of a number of DAB radio stations bundled together to be transmitted digitally on a single frequency in a given geographic area. This makes it a more efficient way of transmitting sound signals compared to analogue radio, where stations are broadcast on individual frequencies.
2. Stations currently need a DSP (Digital Sound Programme) licences to broadcast on a digital radio multiplex. The government is consulting on a new type of DSP license – a C-DSP – for community radio stations. C-DSP licence holders would benefit from being able to access the Community Radio Fund and other social/third sector funding (just as existing analogue community radio station licence holders are able to do so) and the reserved capacity for community radio stations on small scale radio multiplexes.
3. There has been a steady and consistent increase in the take up of digital radio over the past 10 years and digital's share of all radio listening currently sits at 48.8% and 61.1% of households own a DAB radio set (RAJAR Q3 2017).
4. Ofcom's International Communications Market Report 2017 indicates that digital radio listening is higher in the UK than in the other 16 comparator countries.
5. The Broadcasting (Radio Multiplex Services) Act 2017 gives the Secretary

of State a power to modify (through secondary legislation) the various procedures, provisions and conditions that are attached to the award of radio multiplex licences in Part 2 of the Broadcasting Act 1996.

6. DCMS provided funding for a two-year (2014-16) programme of work by Ofcom, building on previous technical development testing in Brighton, to examine the practical viability of a new approach to DAB transmission, known as small scale DAB.
7. As part of the programme DCMS provided funding for Ofcom to conduct 10 technical trials of small scale DAB in cities and towns across the UK. The trials were designed to test the viability of small scale DAB technology and have involved more than 100 small radio stations broadcasting on terrestrial DAB for the first time, including some new services. These 10 trials were initially licensed by Ofcom for 9 months. The trial licences were subsequently extended up to 2 years after a request by DCMS.