

*Championing
excellence and diversity
in broadcasting*



Founded in 1983 by Jocelyn Hay CBE
Springhead Road, Northfleet
Kent, DA11 8HN
Tel: 01474 338716
email: info@vlv.org.uk
VLV: www.vlv.org.uk

The Old Rectory Business Centre

RESPONSE BY THE VOICE OF THE LISTENER & VIEWER

TO

THE OFCOM CONSULTATION

SUPPORTING THE UK'S WIRELESS FUTURE: OUR SPECTRUM

MANAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR THE 2020s

February 2021

INFORMATION ABOUT VLV

The Voice of the Listener & Viewer Limited (VLV) represents the citizen and consumer interests in broadcasting and speaks for listeners and viewers on the full range of broadcasting issues. It uses its independent expertise to champion quality and diversity in public service broadcasting, to respond to consultations, to produce policy briefings and to conduct research. VLV has no political, commercial or sectarian affiliations and is concerned with the issues, structures, institutions and regulations that underpin the British broadcasting system. VLV supports the principles of public service in broadcasting. It is a charitable company limited by guarantee (registered in England and Wales No 4407712 - Charity No 1152136)

Introduction

1. VLV welcomes this opportunity to respond to the consultation on Ofcom's spectrum management strategy for the 2020s.
2. VLV strives to protect the place of PSB services in the communications market and to ensure that these services retain their purpose, to serve both citizens and consumers, and that the spectrum required is made available to support them.
3. VLV agrees that spectrum is a valuable resource and should be used for the public good as well as commercial exploitation. As technology improves more spectrum bands become viable to carry services; these are all in the high GHz region where proportionally more spectrum is available. However, deployment of these bands has technological limits (eg short wavelengths) which direct their use in specific ways. Despite present limits we agree it is wise to explore their potential early as part of stimulating innovation.
4. VLV notes that different bands of the radio spectrum have strengths and weaknesses in their abilities to carry services. The lower wavelengths are best for wide ranging reach where many receivers can be served by a single transmitter. These bands – specifically the VHF and UHF – are most suitable for Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) applications and have been used for this purpose for almost a century.
5. Changes to infrastructure to deliver PSB is slow because of the need to enable the public at large to adapt and because the licensing periods for broadcasters are long term. This requires timely information for consumers and others to prepare for change and so we are pleased that Ofcom intends to publish a "Spectrum Roadmap" (Clause 7.83).
6. VLV is concerned by the erosion of the UHF spectrum allocated to DTT in recent years and we remain concerned about its future. The role of the remaining band (470-694 MHz) which currently supports independent delivery of Freeview services is a vital part of PSB and needs to be protected.
7. VLV notes that as part of its objective to make better use of spectrum Ofcom is proposing to encourage better performance of equipment, especially that used by consumers. We agree with this objective and with its aim of encouraging producers

and users of such equipment to be aware of potential interference issues¹. For over 25 years the Digital Television Group (DTG) has pioneered the specification and testing of consumer equipment used to receive DTT services and this has contributed significantly to the success of DTT and Freeview. Similar success in relaunching DAB services was due to a regime of specification, testing and public information.

8. It is vital to Ofcom's objectives for better spectrum usage that it supports and encourages the DTG and manufacturers to continue to improve standards and testing. In view of the more intensive demands on consumer equipment during periods of rapid technological change, it is also necessary for consumers to be supported when they experience difficulties.
9. However, consumers in general are not technophiles and their equipment and installations are not necessarily current state of the art and may be many years old; in some cases consumers have no access to parts of their reception systems (e.g. in blocks of flats). Some such installations are possibly owned by elderly and/or impecunious consumers; VLV is confident that Ofcom's frequency planners are aware of this fact and will not make specifications excessively stringent in its attempts to optimise spectrum usage in the DTT bands. The band has been released for sharing (White Space) and so the risk of interference is increased as more intensive use is made of it.
10. The expectation of many households, having collectively invested several billions of pounds in the means to receive PSB services, is that more changes will not be made and they will continue to be able to access a wide range of content which is available free of charge at the point of reception through Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT), Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) and analogue transmissions of radio services. These expectations remain even though the service providers may change from time to time.
11. VLV welcomes that spectrum is to be provided for DAB services to be made available more locally.
12. VLV notes that there is little that relates directly to the DTT band in this consultation. However, we are aware that pressure to re-allocate the band which DTT currently uses has not diminished and so we expect that the next World Radio Conference (WRC) in 2023 will consider its future use. VLV has no reason to believe that the projections of the Lamy timetable and plan have changed and so expect its provisions to be upheld.
13. The Lamy plan only conditionally reserves the 470-694 MHz band for DTT until about 2030, the end of the period that this consultation covers. We note that the current DCMS review of DTT Multiplex licences addresses a number of phases during the 2020-30 decade; in its consultation DCMS seeks opinions about the potential harmonisation of the various licence periods. However, DCMS envisages potential extension only as far as 2034. These licences are essential for the continuation of DTT and so if they are extended to 2034, spectrum to support DTT will also need to be secured until at least that time.

¹ *Supporting the UK's wireless future: Our spectrum management strategy for the 2020s*, Ofcom, 4 December 2020, Clause 7.78 et seq

14. VLV welcomes that Ofcom, in its work plan for 2020-21, recognised the important role that PSB plays in the the lives of UK citizens. This is echoed in the DCMS consultation about DTT multiplex licences. The response of the PSB system to the Covid pandemic has been exemplary and provided essential services; it has adapted promptly to the needs of audiences, has provided citizens with reliable news and information which is impartial and accurate. This provision has been vital when other media, especially social media, have allowed misleading and sometimes erroneous information to be published.
15. Given the public support for PSB and, in view of possible changes to the use of the DTT bands of spectrum during the coming decade, we would expect Ofcom to robustly defend the use of spectrum to support the delivery of PSB both nationally and internationally.

Consultation Questions

VLV's response to these questions is largely limited to factors that affect broadcasting and its use of spectrum.

Question 1: Do you have comments on the overall approach to the review?

16. No comment

Question 2: Have we captured the major trends that are likely to impact spectrum management over the next ten years?

17. Broadly, the the consultation document has captured the major trends which are likely to impact spectrum management over the next ten years. The interests of VLV in spectrum are focused on broadcasting and therefore are particularly concerned with the DTT band and its likely future use.
18. There is little content in the consultation that provides any indication of Ofcom's view of the prospects for the particular band which DTT currently occupies.
19. VLV notes one aspect of future public/open networks which will require much attention in the coming decade is security and resilience to unauthorised and disruptive access. This is to preserve privacy but also to resist attempts to harm. See also reply to next question.

Question 3: Could any of the future technologies we have identified in Annex 6, or any others, have disruptive implications for how spectrum is managed in the future? When might those implications emerge?

20. There is much discussion in the technology world regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI). Although AI has been in an emergent state for some time, it is likely to expand during the coming decade. The "Internet of Things" will doubtless support AI systems.
21. AI will almost certainly provide extended automatic control of complex networks with self-healing and self-adjustment to cyber-attack. It could also be a significant element in managing shared network access.

22. Whilst it will be the responsibility of commercial and government agencies to protect themselves, public networks will require a more appropriate approach. Given the role that social networks have played in recent controversial political events, government may wish to take action, directing its agencies to provide solutions that relate to systems that use spectrum.

Question 4: Do you agree that there is likely to be greater demand for local access to spectrum in the future? Do you agree with our proposal to consider further options for localised spectrum access when authorising new access to spectrum?

23. If widespread Internet of Things (IoT) technologies emerge during the coming decade, VLV believes there is likely to be greater demand for local access to spectrum in the future. "Local" in this context could be very short distances in homes and small businesses but also in community networks.

Question 5: Do you agree with the actual and perceived barriers identified for innovation in new wireless technologies, and our proposed ways of tackling those?

24. Broadly we agree with Ofcom's analysis of the actual and perceived barriers identified for innovation in new wireless technologies and the proposed ways of tackling those.

Question 6: Do you agree with Ofcom's proposals to improve our outreach and reporting activities, and spectrum information tools?

25. VLV agrees with Ofcom's proposals to improve its outreach and reporting activities and spectrum information tools. It is a world where technological change is so rapid and communication systems are becoming varied and widespread, communicating with those in markets and elsewhere is more important. One specifically important sector to consider when improving outreach is citizens. Keeping consumers apprised of potential change in a timely manner and protecting them from unfair practices is one of Ofcom's essential statutory duties.

a) Are there additional ways that Ofcom could better engage with existing and future users and providers of wireless communications?

26. While VLV accepts that many citizens do not have extensive knowledge or understanding of spectrum issues, VLV holds that it is a key responsibility for Ofcom to engage with and inform citizens about developments in communications.

27. VLV is concerned that Ofcom's stakeholder engagement is mostly focused on institutions and commercial corporations which have vested interests as well as the necessary resources and expertise to engage with them. VLV is concerned that the voices of citizens are not heard loudly enough in communications policy debates. VLV draws a distinction between the needs of citizens and consumers. We define the needs of citizens as being less focused on the benefit of individual consumers and more on the benefit of society as a whole. We believe that commercial organisations are interested in mostly serving the needs of consumers in order to maximise income. The challenge Ofcom faces is to balance the needs of wider society and the needs of individuals.

28. In 2018 the Consumer Forum for Communications, a coalition of civil society organisations concerned about communications issues, was disbanded. The

closure of the CFC has led to less representation of citizen interests within Ofcom, especially for vulnerable sectors of society. There appear to VLV to be few opportunities for citizens to influence Ofcom's strategy, especially in areas which are highly technical, such as spectrum management.

29. It is crucial the rights and needs of citizens are highlighted in this debate and therefore VLV would welcome any initiatives Ofcom can develop to ensure that this need to consult with and communicate with citizens is met.

b) Please explain any specific areas where you believe more or better provision of information could provide value to stakeholders

30. No comment.

Question 7: Do you agree that it is important to make more spectrum available for innovation before its long-term use is certain? Do you have any comments about our proposed approach to doing this?

31. Technological innovation is important in the future of both public and commercial communications services. Recent technologies have been complex and required international collaboration to bring to fruition. This trend will continue and, given the increasing complexity of new systems, thorough real-world testing before launch seems wise. Commercial networks will need to do this anyway, both individually and collectively (i.e. standards bodies), but they will need access to appropriate spectrum to provide a real network.

Question 8: Do you agree that it is important to encourage spectrum users to be 'good neighbours' to ensure more efficient use of the spectrum? Do you agree with our proposals to:

a) increase realism in coexistence analysis at a national and international level?

32. VLV agrees with Ofcom's proposals to increase realism in coexistence analysis at a national and international level. It is vitally important for all spectrum users to control interference and, given the need to exploit spectrum more intensively, managing interference becomes even more important. The vagaries of radio propagation mean that this will not be perfectly realisable and so pragmatism and a will to co-operate will be crucial.

b) encourage spectrum users to be more resilient to interference?

33. VLV agrees with Ofcom's proposal to encourage spectrum users to be more resilient to interference, but this may not always be possible and the service providers and spectrum licensees, as well as regulators, will especially need to be active in monitoring occurrences of interference.

c) ensure an efficient balance between the level of interference protection given to one service and the flexibility for others to transmit?

34. See reply above. Achieving such a balance depends specifically on the services that are likely to be affected. VLV considers that priority must be given to all public services.

Do you have any comments on which of these will be the most important?

35. All these aspects of managing interference are vitally important and certain aspects will be more or less important in different contexts.

36. Whilst Ofcom will wish to enable better exploitation of spectrum for public and commercial purposes and will licence suitable organisations to deliver services, it is Ofcom which will ultimately be responsible for the equitable use of spectrum and the maintenance of appropriate interference controls.

Question 9: Are there any other issues or potential future challenges that should be considered as part of this strategy?

37. During the coming decade and beyond the issue of climate change will become increasingly important. The use of radio spectrum within an overall communications policy will need to support revised working practices – as has been seen during the Covid pandemic – in order that the impact of social and economic activities on climate can be reduced.

Question 10: Do you agree that continued use of our existing spectrum management tools (as set out in sections 4-7) will be relevant and important for promoting our objectives in the future, in light of future trends?

38. VLV agrees that continued use of Ofcom's existing spectrum management tools will be important for promoting Ofcom's objectives in the future. More intensive exploitation of spectrum will need better models and planning tools. It will also require close co-operation with corporations and operators which use spectrum.

Question 11: Is there anything else we should be considering doing, or doing differently, to promote our objectives?

39. No comment.