



COMMUNITY
BROADCASTING
ASSOCIATION OF
AUSTRALIA

Proposal to vary the Queensland DRCP and declare a foundation DRMT licence for the Gold Coast

Comments on the ACMA consultation paper

OCTOBER 2020

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the ACMA consultation paper and proposal to vary the Queensland Digital Radio Channel Plan (DRCP) and declare a foundation Digital Radio Multiplex Transmitter (DRMT) licence for the Gold Coast.
- 1.2 The Community Broadcasting Association of Australia is the peak body for community broadcasting licensees in Australia.
- 1.3 Nationally, 359 (and a further 91 temporary) not-for-profit community radio services provide significant public benefit, including a diverse mix of social and cultural interests, specialist talks and music, and high levels of local content and presentation.
- 1.4 Community interests addressed include Indigenous services, radio reading services for the print disability community, youth, seniors, LGBTQIA+, religious and faith-based services, ethnic language and multicultural radio, specialist music, educational and general geographic services.
- 1.5 In metropolitan areas there are a greater number of specific community interest services. In regional and rural communities, community radio stations more frequently provide diverse programming covering broad community interests under a general geographic licence, with a high number of Indigenous services in remote locations.
- 1.6 Community radio stations operate in the majority of towns and cities across Australia, with approximately 75% located in regional and remote areas, and 25% across metropolitan locations.
- 1.7 Guiding principles underpin community broadcasting Codes of Practice and the contribution of community services to media diversity and social inclusion.
- 1.8 Community broadcasting licences are issued pursuant to and in promotion of the objects of the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 (BSA).

2. Brisbane and the Gold Coast

- 2.1 Community broadcasting services operate in Brisbane and the Gold Coast, the two licence areas that are the focus of this consultation.
- 2.2 In Brisbane there are 7 community broadcasting licensees providing digital radio services: some in simulcast with analogue; some providing unique content and in addition to content otherwise available on analogue; and some providing temporary, seasonal or event-based services.
- 2.3 The Gold Coast has 4 community broadcasting licensees operating analogue services, three with standard access entitlements to capacity on a foundation digital radio transmission multiplex as is proposed to be declared. The fourth community broadcasting service is planned for analogue operation but not permanently allocated.¹
- 2.4 A legislated ambition described by the Broadcasting Services Act is to develop diversity in the transition to digital broadcasting, including community and Indigenous broadcasting.²
- 2.5 This necessarily adds priority for digital radio services on the Gold Coast to complement the content of existing on-air services. There is a case for community service content outcomes to include radio reading and Indigenous service additions, and other specialist and cultural services may also be relevant.
- 2.6 These service and content outcomes could be achieved by way of secondary content services, rather than or as well as simulcast services, or else given effect by way of ACMA applying its deeming powers on an out-of-area basis.
- 2.7 In any scenario, the result is that the reserved and further available capacity on a foundation multiplex operating on the Gold Coast has potential for efficient use, and to accord with the ambition of the Act to develop diversity.

¹ If a service is allocated ahead of digital radio start-up day there is an automatic entitlement to digital radio capacity. If allocated after digital radio start-up day a new service may be allocated as an analogue only service, a digital only service, or both.

² Broadcasting Services Act 1992, Section 3 generally, and, specifically, subsection 3 (1) (n) which says, 'to ensure the maintenance and, where possible, the development of diversity, including public, community and indigenous broadcasting, in the Australian broadcasting system in the transition to digital broadcasting.'

3. Neighbouring Licence Areas

- 3.1 The scope of the proposed DRCP variation is limited to the Brisbane and Gold Coast RA1 licence areas.
- 3.2 However, services operating in neighbouring licence areas, including Nambour RA1 to the north of Brisbane and especially Murwillumbah RA1, south of the Gold Coast, are matters to also be considered.³
- 3.3 Planning to enable digital radio for these neighbouring licence areas should be considered contemporaneously with the Gold Coast.
- 3.4 The case for more properly considering Murwillumbah is compelling. The Murwillumbah RA1 licence area overlaps the Gold Coast RA1 by 26% and vice-versa by 66%.
- 3.5 In effect, the start-up of digital radio services in the Gold Coast RA1, will bring Gold Coast digital radio to 66% of the Murwillumbah RA1 population.
- 3.6 Unless and until a DRCP is published for the Murwillumbah RA1 there is a significant opportunity imbalance and challenge to procedural fairness.
- 3.7 There are 3 commercial radio licensees operating in the Gold Coast RA1.
- 3.8 Only 1 commercial radio service operates in the Murwillumbah RA1.
- 3.9 The Murwillumbah RA1 also overlaps with its neighbouring licence area Lismore RA1, which has 2 commercial radio licensees.
- 3.10 Allocation of an entire digital radio multiplex for 1 or 2 services is not spectrum efficient. There is significant scope for improved spectrum efficiency and cost reductions.
- 3.11 The digital radio allotment plan, being the step preceding a DRCP, identifies a common main transmit site at Mt Nardi for both Murwillumbah RA1 and Lismore RA1.
- 3.12 In the case of Murwillumbah RA1 and Lismore RA1, given the common main transmission site and other relevant factors⁴, there is an opportunity to consider a lateral solution - where both licence areas are retained, but are allocated a common channel.
- 3.13 This approach may not offend the existing legislative framework being, as it is, based on historic commercial licence area boundaries.⁵
- 3.14 Commercial services separately targeted to the populations of Murwillumbah and Lismore can be carried on the common channel.
- 3.15 The approach of using a common channel across Murwillumbah and Lismore would likely be appropriate for the content services of the national broadcasters.
- 3.16 Community services already operate within the boundaries of Murwillumbah RA1, as well as Lismore RA1, and also across both. Therefore, the reserved and further available capacity can be efficiently and appropriately taken up.
- 3.17 This would bring a very significant cost and spectrum efficiency without need for change to the current legislation planning based on commercial radio Licence Area boundaries.

4. Gold Coast - in-fill

- 4.1 The proposed DRCP includes two sites for coverage of the Gold Coast RA1, with the main site being Mt Tamborine, and an in-fill site at Springbrook.
- 4.2 The CBAA supports the use of in-fill at the Springbrook site as it will address coverage deficiencies in the southern parts of the Gold Coast RA1 otherwise evident from the main transmission site.
- 4.3 Aside from Springbrook, there are other in-fill sites that may be necessary and have been identified in the allotment plan, but not specifically listed as part of the proposed DRCP.
- 4.4 These include Currumbin to improve coverage at Broadbeach, and another site to improve coverage to the north-eastern part of the Gold Coast RA1.
- 4.5 While these sites are not listed, the Springbrook site has been included in the proposed DRCP, perhaps as it sits outside the boundary of the Gold Coast RA1.

³ The ACMA is required to consider neighbouring licence areas under the Broadcasting Services Act 1992, Section 23, Planning Criteria.

⁴ The existing commercial radio service in Murwillumbah and the two commercial radio services in Lismore are controlled by the one owner.

⁵ The CBAA has long advocated that planning for free-to-air digital radio requires fresh considerations in a contemporary environment and to exercise flexibilities and be future-facing, rather than solely replicate historic demarcations devised for an analogue radio broadcasting framework.

- 4.6 The Springbrook site sits outside of the boundary of the Gold Coast RA1 licence area, but within the boundary of the Murwillumbah RA1 licence area.
- 4.7 That it is sited within the Murwillumbah RA1 boundary yet relates to the coverage of the Gold Coast RA1 may be the reason for inclusion of the Springbrook site in the proposed DRCP, while no other in-fill sites related to Gold Coast RA1 are included in the DRCP.

5. Gold Coast - main site

- 5.1 The nominal main transmission site for digital radio across the Gold Coast RA1 is specified in the proposed DRCP as being Mt Tamborine.
- 5.2 There is another and relevant main transmission site already operating within the Gold Coast RA1 at Lower Beechmont.
- 5.3 The CBAA considers the DRCP should be adjusted so that either of these two main sites might be able to be used - by any, either or all DRMT licensees.
- 5.4 In other words, the Lower Beechmont site should be added to the DRCP, with an appropriate pattern and ERP so as to enable matched coverage and interference management.
- 5.5 The opportunity for any of the DRMT licensees to make use of either main site will assist competitive outcomes from the transmission facility owners and providers.
- 5.6 Having the two main sites nominated is in line with best and existing practice to date, where the DRCP specifies a nominal main site and/but where that nominal site has within its scope multiple options of transmission facility providers.
- 5.7 Subject to the inclusion of two main site options, the CBAA has no objection to the pattern and power as proposed from the Mt Tamborine site.

6. Brisbane - main site

- 6.1 The main transmission site for digital radio across the Brisbane RA1 is already specified in the existing DRCP at Mt Coot-Tha.
- 6.2 In this case, specifying a single nominal main site at Mt Coot-Tha is sufficient as it has within its scope multiple options of transmission facility owners and providers.
- 6.3 The CBAA has no objection to the proposed change in the specification of maximum height to 192 metres from the previous 161 metres subject to this resulting in no change to existing operational arrangements, and that the change does not preclude use of either main transmission site option at Mt Coot-Tha.
- 6.4 The CBAA has no objection to the proposed change to reduce the depth of restrictions of the horizontal radiation pattern as proposed in Appendix C of the consultation paper.
- 6.5 The increase in the practical maximum from 23 kW ERP to the original intended and nominal maximum of 50 kW ERP is welcome, and being made possible for the first time since the introduction of digital radio to Brisbane.
- 6.6 The CBAA welcomes the improvement this will bring to coverage for listeners in the Brisbane area.
- 6.7 The CBAA notes that, where it is constrained, the maximum ERP at various depression angles is now increased to a maximum of 26 kW which may increase the amount of overspill to adjacent commercial Licence Areas.
- 6.8 Consistent with its previous position, the CBAA prioritises the coverage and availability of community services to listeners above overspill considerations.

7. Brisbane - in-fill

- 7.1 The change to the technical specification of the Brisbane main transmission site may occasion a review of the technical operating parameters of co-channel in-fill, including to the north at the Mount Mee in-fill site.
- 7.2 The consultation paper proposes a change to section 6 of the DRCP to provide for the technical specifications of a co-channel transmitter licensed under a DRMT licence to be specified in the DRMT licence.
- 7.3 This would seem to provide a mechanism, outside of the DRCP itself, to properly consider any interference and signal overspill from Mount Mee or other in-fill sites.