RTE must show equality to all

RTE’s plan to drop its medium-wave radio broadcasts from next month may well be regarded by its Dublin-based executives as both a necessary and inevitable step. It is certainly true that the change will make little difference to the majority of RTE listeners across Ireland, who can easily return to the FM band.

However, as our coverage today explains, the move, if it goes ahead, will have a potentially dramatic impact on the station’s audience in Belfast and many other parts of Northern Ireland.

Many northerners fear that RTE Radio One, which offers a comprehensive range of news, sport and entertainment programmes, is effectively turning its back on Ireland’s second city.

The key issue is that the present RTE FM signal in Belfast, as the station openly accepts, varies between the weak and the non-existent.

Most listeners in the city and across much of north Down and most of Co Antrim, an area with an estimated population of 600,000 people, are forced to rely instead on the medium-wave alternative.

RTE also broadcasts on long wave, but this is not available in many cars and ordinary household radios.

The only remaining options, via the internet or satellite dishes, are of no use to all motorists and many older listeners.

It is obvious that RTE must upgrade its existing FM signal across the north significantly, and the station has at least indicated that it is working towards achieving this aim before the medium-wave shut-down on March 24.

Unfortunately, the lack of specific information in relation to the FM initiative and, in fact that, as of yesterday, the section on the official RTE website dealing with the changeover offered no advice whatsoever to northerners, does not increase confidence about the outcome.

There will be a widespread feeling that improvements to the FM signal should have been in place long before the axing of the medium-wave alternative was even considered.

It will also be noted that, according to Ofercom, the body which regulates the communications industry in Northern Ireland and Britain, RTE’s attempts to link environmental concerns to its proposals are debatable.

There is plainly a strong case for postponing the medium-wave switch-off until all interested parties are fully satisfied about the consequences.

If some form of intervention is required from Stormont, it is clear that a number of MLAs are already paying close attention to the matter.

Whatever happens, RTE must be seen to demonstrate that it holds all its listeners throughout Ireland in equal esteem.