

RTE committed to entire island

PLATFORM

John Paul Coakley, head of operations of RTE radio, insists it is “not stepping back” from Northern Ireland despite a decision to end its medium wave service

ANYONE reading recent coverage might be forgiven for reaching the conclusion that RTE Radio 1 would no longer be available in Northern Ireland. This is not the case.

True, we are reducing the number of national platforms from three to two but we will be improving our RTE Radio 1 FM service and continuing our Long Wave 252 service (which came on air in 2004).

Our aim is that within a couple of months the RTE Radio 1 service to Northern Ireland will be as good as, if not better than, it has ever been.

There is no regulatory framework in Northern Ireland for the broadcast of our services.

Under international agreements separate and distinct jurisdictions apply to frequency allocations.

RTE Radio cannot site transmissions within Northern Ireland.

That said, RTE Radio is strongly aware of its responsibility to the population of the entire island of Ireland. As part of the rebalanc-

ing of our distribution networks, therefore, we plan to bring our RTE Radio 1 service to Northern Ireland into line with that available to the rest of the island.

On January 19 RTE announced the closure of its Radio 1 medium wave (MW) service on March 24 next.

RTE Radio has four national services – Radio 1, 2fm, lyric fm and Raidió na Gaeltachta. Of these stations only one, RTE Radio 1, is available on a band other than FM.

No other broadcaster on the island provides MW or LW services.

There is considerable duplication. The three wavebands carry the same content, with the exception of an average 4 per cent of on-air time allocated to special religious and sporting programmes broadcast only on MW and LW.

Medium wave is prone to interference – the audio quality is poor and the single MW mast and transmitter in Tullamore cost 50 per cent more to run than the entire network of 41 FM transmitters – due to MW annual electricity costs of €1 million.



■ **AWARE:** RTE radio's head of operations John Paul Coakley says the national broadcaster is strongly aware of its responsibility to the entire island of Ireland

This is an exceptionally inefficient method of transmitting to the island and the carbon fuels burnt in powering this transmitter are difficult to justify from an environmental perspective. In short, MW offers poor value for public money.

Just 2 per cent of RTE Radio1 listeners say that they have 'listened yesterday' to medium wave.

This rises to one in 10 when those who 'ever listen' are included.

The lower levels of listening and higher costs mean that MW is now 15 times more expensive per listener than FM. And MW listening figures may be exaggerated – a techni-

cal fault on February 5/6 last resulted in 16 hours of silence. We had one email to the station.

The closure of medium wave will assist in funding FM improvements. FM is by far the dominant radio platform in developed countries.

FM is stereo, excellent quality and available in many more devices than MW (radios, mobile phones, mp3 players etc).

RTE Radio 1 FM currently covers 75 per cent of Northern Ireland but has poor coverage around the Belfast Metropolitan Area due to local interference.

The other three RTE FM radio sta-

tions do not suffer this interference. To date, these RTE Radio 1 reception difficulties have been compensated, to a certain extent, by the additional availability of MW and LW in this area.

RTE is reviewing how to best improve Radio 1 FM reception for the nearly 600,000 people living in this area. This review will conclude in early March and we intend to take action prior to the closure of medium wave.

In deciding to maintain our Long Wave 252 service, a key factor was signal reach.

This is consistent with the requirements of the 2007 Broadcasting (Amendment) Act that directs RTE to provide services to the Irish diaspora.

Both do a reasonable job of covering the island (LW does slightly better) but long wave's greater reach and clarity mean that it gives a better service than medium wave to Irish people living in Britain.

So, RTE has decided that on balance it should no longer sustain its MW service. The FM and Long Wave services will remain.

RTE will address areas of poor FM reception as an immediate priority, to ensure that both FM and long wave are consistently available throughout the island.

Reader, rest assured, while we are walking away from a form of radio whose day has passed, we are certainly not stepping back from our responsibility to serve the whole island.

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“I would like to find out the background to this”

Barry McElduff (SF)



“They are a foreign broadcaster”

David McNarry (UUP)



“It wasn't of any interest to me”

Nelson McCausland (DUP)

Unionists not interested in medium-wave decision

By Claire Simpson

THE assembly's culture, arts and leisure committee has rejected a request from a Sinn Féin assembly member that it write to the director general of RTE to ask why the broadcaster decided to ditch its medium-wave service.

RTE said last month that it would scrap its Radio 1 medium-wave (MW) transmissions from March 24, forcing thousands of listeners to tune into longwave

or cope with a patchy FM service.

The committee's chairman Barry McElduff asked unionist colleagues for their support for his proposal at the end of a lengthy meeting yesterday. Mr McElduff said he would like “the backing of the committee to write to RTE director general Cathal Goan to ask for more information about the decision”.

“I would like to find out the background to this,” he added.

However, his request was

met by an angry response from the committee's deputy chair, Ulster Unionist David McNarry, who said: “What business is it of ours?”

“So what? This is nothing to do with the committee,” he said.

“They are a foreign broadcaster. We have no regulatory responsibility.”

“Are we going to write to Spanish broadcasters now?”

The DUP's Nelson McCausland said he had read about RTE's decision to scrap medium-wave but

“it wasn't of any interest to me”.

Mr McElduff said he accepted the committee's decision and was “disappointed but not totally surprised”.

“I would be remiss if I did not reflect the wishes of my constituents and ask,” he said.

Despite the committee's decision, RTE still faces opposition to the move from political parties on both sides of the border, including Sinn Féin, the SDLP, Fine Gael and Labour.