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5-star Celtic keep up pace

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Antrim back down to earth

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Minister weighs in on RTE's switch-off

By Valerie Robinson
Southern Correspondent

THE Republic's foreign affairs minister, Dermot Ahern, has intervened in the controversy surrounding an RTE decision to scrap its medium-wave transmission which will affect thousands of listeners in the north.

Despite growing pressure on the broadcaster to abandon the plan, RTE has insisted the service will be dropped next month and that it intends to compensate by improving FM reception in the north which it admits is patchy.

Thousands of Radio 1 listeners in Northern Ireland fear they will be left with no service or an inadequate service from March 24.

Mr Ahern, who is TD for Louth, has confirmed he has written to RTE's Belfast-born director general Cathal Goan to convey the "acute concerns" of people who have contacted him.

An official in the Department of Foreign Affairs said Mr Ahern was worried about the impact the loss of Radio 1 on medium wave (MW) would have on northern listeners.

When his officials met Mr Goan last week and broached the subject informally they were told the broadcaster had made a "technical decision" and received assurances that the station would still be available on long wave 252.

RTE has said it will work hard in the coming weeks to ensure listeners can still receive Radio 1.

A spokeswoman for the state-funded body said northern listen-

ers would be given information on how to continue to listen on alternative platforms such as long wave, online or satellite services.

She admitted that RTE Radio's FM coverage in Northern Ireland is patchy, particularly around Belfast where 600,000 people experience poor reception.

A review is under way. RTE plans to improve its Radio 1 FM reception before dropping MW.

Politicians on both sides of the border have spoken out against the loss of the MW service.

The Republic's communications minister, Eamon Ryan, has confirmed that RTE is legally obliged to provide free-to-air radio to the whole community.

He urged it "to ensure that no listener loses access to existing services".

SDLP assembly member PJ Bradley said Radio 1 "links the nation north and south".

"Its prime programmes of news and current affairs are speech-based and, unlike long wave, MW is available on all dual-band radios," he said.

"Medium wave is much easier to tune than FM no matter where one travels in Ireland."

Both Mr Bradley and Fine Gael TD Simon Coveney expressed concerns about the effect the move would have on elderly people, some of whom are uncomfortable using modern technology and rely heavily on Radio 1 MW for a link to the outside world.

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Frisbee fun at festival



■ **AT PLAY:** Malachi McGibben (two) from north Belfast enjoys the children's fun day, part of Feile an Earraigh

PICTURE: Colm O'Reilly



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