

Ofcom consultation on making amateur radio licences fit for the future

Here Ofcom Director for Spectrum, David Willis, tells us about Ofcom's ongoing consultation on changes to the amateur radio licence, why they are doing this and why now

I recently joined Ofcom as Group Director for Spectrum, building on 30 years in the telecom and communications industry, in the public sector as a regulator and in the private sector, building optical, wireless and software products. As a former CEO often told us, everything is going wireless – it is mobile, convenient and ultimately cheaper. Radio amateurs have played an instrumental role in the development of wireless globally and are an important and vocal constituency that continues to contribute. I will always remember how the radio amateurs on the Canadian delegation ensured that my first trip to Geneva included a visit to the permanent amateur site at the ITU (4U1ITU) where their pride of place shone through.

Radio spectrum is a limited resource and Ofcom has the important job of ensuring it is used in the best interests of all in the UK. This approach sits at the heart of Ofcom's mission to make communications work for everyone. Among other things, this entails managing some 100,000 amateur radio licences.

We fully recognise the contribution amateur radio has made to developing radio technologies over the years, including in the development of radar and LTE. We know how important amateur radio is as a hobby to those who are involved, and that it plays an important role in nurturing the next generation of radio engineers.

Amateur radio has been subject to regulation since the days of Experimental Stations, over a century ago. This regulation has always had the same aim: to enable radio amateurs to pursue their hobby and to promote responsible use of the airwaves. From time to time, such as in 2006 and 2014, we review our licence conditions, to make sure they maintain the right balance between regulatory control and allowing operating freedoms, taking account of changes in technology and the needs of the hobby.

We think that some restrictions have become unnecessary or outdated, for example connecting to the internet is second nature nowadays, yet a radio amateur needs special authorisation for a gateway. The number and nature of the enquiries we receive, too, illustrate that there is uncertainty about what is permitted in many areas.

In our current review we have looked at the existing licence conditions to see if they are still needed, relevant and clear. In particular, we have aimed to:

- modernise our policies and rules to allow radio amateurs greater operating freedoms, while maintaining appropriate regulatory control over spectrum use; and
- make our rules as clear and streamlined as possible, with other spectrum areas that we authorise, to improve consistency and responsiveness. This is part of a broader effort by Ofcom to simplify, standardise and where possible further automate elements of our licensing work to improve the services we provide and reduce administrative burdens for our licensees as far as possible.
- We believe our proposals will simplify amateur radio licensing and provide clear, updated rules that today and tomorrow's radio amateurs can easily understand. In a snapshot, our proposals include:
 - increasing the maximum permitted power for all licensees (to 1kW for Full licensees in some bands);
 - allowing anyone to operate amateur radio under the licensee's supervision;
 - permitting the use of a range of modes of operation, such as repeaters and gateways, without the need to apply for a variation to the licence;
 - updating the rules on licences, so that each radio amateur has just one personal licence and callsign;
 - streamlining and modernising our callsign assignment policies (for example by making RSLs optional); and
 - for the Foundation Licence, we are also proposing to relax the restrictions on the equipment that licensees may use and to grant access to more spectrum.

We're not proposing to implement all of these changes at once. We aim to vary each amateur radio licence, so that the changes that just need an update to licence conditions are in place early in 2024. Later next year, we aim to make the changes that require an update to our existing licensing systems. Finally, by early in 2025, we aim to have the remaining changes in place. These require a new licensing platform.

We'd really welcome responses to our consultation, which you can find on our website, by 4 September. We'll take account of all responses provided before taking final decisions on next steps. We'll follow this up, before the end of the year, with a statement setting out the changes we'll be making to amateur radio licensing and how we plan to proceed with making these changes through our licence variation process and changes to our systems.

We believe our proposals provide a framework which will enable more operating freedoms for amateur radio licensees in a clearer, streamlined system, and should help the amateur radio hobby continue to thrive in the years to come.



You can also find a link to the consultation and RSGB resources for radio amateurs via: [rsgb.org/licence-review](https://www.rsgb.org/licence-review)