

Community broadcasting licence areas: community-of-interest ties is the latest ABA fact sheet. It looks at the ABA's planning process in identifying and allocating vacant radio and television channels.

Community broadcasting licence areas: community-of-interest ties

The ABA is engaged in a national planning process to identify vacant radio and television channels (FM and AM radio, VHF and UHF television) and allocate licences for new broadcasting services. The process also aims to plan for improving the reception of existing national, commercial, community and open narrowcasting services.

When planning for new commercial and community broadcasting services, the ABA determines the licence area a service will be licensed to serve. A licence area is defined as a population within a geographic area and is determined with reference to Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data.

The ABA may vary a community licence area e.g. to match an existing commercial licence area, or to include a surrounding area. In deciding to vary a licence area, the ABA's determination may be made on the basis of community-of-interest ties.

This article outlines the policy guidelines ABA has adopted for assessing community-of-interest ties when determining new, or variations to existing, community broadcasting licence areas. For the purposes of this policy, when determining a licence area or variation, the ABA equates community with community-of-interest.

What is a community-of-interest?

There have been two models for licensing community services in Australia: special interest and geographic or broad based community radio licences. Although these two classes of licence are no longer in the legislation, they continue to frame the

approach to defining community for the purposes of community broadcasting.

Given the role that community broadcasters play in promoting the objects of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, the ABA believes the most useful definition of community is therefore one that is broad and takes into account social, historical and cultural links. The objects of the Act include promoting the diversity of broadcasting services available to the public; developing and reflecting Australian identity, character and cultural diversity; and providing programming material that is locally significant.

For the purposes of planning community broadcasting services, the term community refers to a group of people who share a common identity, such as geographical location, class or ethnic background, or who share a special interest. As this equates to community-of-interest, all existing community broadcasting licensees are included within this definition.

Many licensed and aspirant community broadcasters represent a community of interest that may change over time. For example, diversification of the economic base of rural communities, when combined with other factors such as increased unemployment and the mobility of populations looking for work, is changing the significance of the geographical boundary as a determinant of a rural community.

The ABA considers that adopting policy guidelines that allow for the changing nature of a community-of-interest promotes the object of the Act, 'to promote the role of broadcasting services in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity'. The ABA considers that this object recognises the active nature

of culture, and hence community. The ABA also notes that there is a need for balance so that, 'the licensee will continue to represent the community interest that it represented at the time when the licence was allocated'.

It should be noted that a flexible approach to defining community-of-interest is not an invitation to vary the conditions of licence.

Planning process

The planning process is proceeding according to the planning priorities determined in September 1993.¹ The planning priorities generally give highest priority to geographic areas least well served by existing services. The ABA is developing licence area plans which determine the number and characteristics of broadcasting services to be available in an area. To do this, the ABA must undertake wide public consultation and have regard to a range of demographic, social and economic factors within an area. (For copies of the ABA's *Planning Priorities* call (freecall) 1800 810241).

ABA policy guidelines for assessing community-of-interest ties

When determining a new community broadcasting service licence area or granting an extension to an existing community broadcasting licence area the ABA will have regard to:

- 1 Whether a community broadcasting service exists in the proposed licence area, and whether it serves a 'special interest' or geographically ('broad-based') community-of-interest.
- 2 Whether there is spectrum avail-

able to provide coverage of the geographic area requested.

3 Whether a community-of-interest exists, over what geographic area, and whether that community-of-interest is currently being served. Indicators of community-of-interest include:

- social and economic links between major urban centres (e.g. shopping, sporting, employment, banking, or other cultural links);
- governmental functions and responsibilities (e.g. local government, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, council boundaries);
- topography;
- existing media markets; and
- whether people identify with a notion of community for the purposes of access to services, for example, people with a disability such as a sight impairment.

4 In cases where an extension of a community service licence area is sought, whether a more locally-based aspirant group exists that could serve the area, and whether that would better promote the objects of the Act.

5 In cases where an existing community broadcaster seeks to extend its licence area and there is no locally-based aspirant group, whether the applicant can demonstrate that it has actively sought to foster the development of an independent locally-based community service e.g. via advertisements, or other regular promotional activities in the community.

6 In cases where an existing community broadcaster seeks to extend its licence area, and endeavours to foster an independent locally-based aspirant group have proven to be unsuccessful, whether members of the community that the licensed community broadcaster aims to serve will be able to actively participate in the operations and programming of the licensee in providing the service. Where the geographic distance may seem to prohibit active participation, and the licensed community broadcaster can demonstrate that initiatives to foster the establishment of a locally-based community radio broadcasting service have proven to be unsuccessful, applicants will be required to outline the strategies they would adopt to overcome such problems;

7 In the case of an existing community broadcasting licensee seeking to extend its licence area, whether the licensee is meeting its current maximum operating conditions, in particular, whether it is serving communities of 200 or more within its existing licence area. In the preparation of licence area plans, the ABA assumes, when planning the technical characteristics of services that communities with a population of 200 people or more are entitled to expect a service from a broadcaster that is licensed to provide one.²

8 What plans the aspirant or existing broadcaster has to meet maximum technical operating conditions in the near future, including the applicant's financial capacity to provide the service.

9 The feasibility that the community to be served can provide and sustain a community broadcasting service.

10 Whether a retransmission of a service outside of its licence area under section 212 of the Act would better promote the objects of the Act.


11 Such other matters as the ABA considers relevant.

It is important to note that the ABA places the onus on the organisation making the request to demonstrate that a community-of-interest exists. It must also demonstrate its financial and technical capacity to deliver the service and that it has attempted to foster the establishment of a locally-based community broadcasting service. Where this can be proven to be unsuccessful, it must detail the mechanisms for ensuring the community it intends to serve will be able to participate in the operation and programming of the service. In applying the policy guidelines the ABA will acknowledge changes in communities for example, electoral redistribution.

Notifying the ABA

If you wish to notify the ABA of your organisation's interest in extending an existing community licence area, or for consideration of a new community licence area, please send a written submission addressing the policy guidelines to the ABA's Canberra office.

Please note that any submissions you send will be made available for public inspection as part of the licence area

planning exercise currently being conducted by the ABA. 

1 ABA Planning Priorities, September 1993, p.55.

2 ABA Record of Assumptions, licence area planning.

ABA fact sheets

Other fact sheets available from the ABA include:

- ABA Investigations
- Allocation of Community Broadcasting Licences
- Broadcasting and Communications Industry Regulators in Australia
- Callsigns
- Class Licences
- Community Radio Broadcasters and Sponsorship Announcements
- How to Read a Licence Area Plan
- Price-based Allocation of transmitter licences for open narrowcasting services
- Notification Obligations of Commercial Licensees and Controllers
- Planning for Broadcasting Services
- Price-based Allocation of Commercial Broadcasting Licences
- Requests for ABA Opinions Concerning Control of Licences
- Re-transmission Within Licence Areas
- A Summary of the Control Provisions of the Broadcasting Services Act 1992
- Special Events
- Subscription Television Broadcasting Services in Australia
- Technical Planning Guidelines
- Temporary Transmissions by Aspirant Community Broadcasters
- Transmitter Licences for New Commercial and Community Broadcasters

For copies of ABA fact sheets, please call the ABA on (02) 334 7700 or Freecall 1800 226 667.

Or write to the ABA

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**All fact sheets will shortly be available on the ABA's Web site.
URL: <http://www.dca.gov.au/aba/hpcov.htm>**