

RADIO HAFREN STILL GOING STRONG ON AM

Is it still possible to use an AM frequency commercially? In the Netherlands the possibilities were recently debated following the close-down of Radio Waddenzee. Although Radio Seagull is now using its 1602 AM frequency, it seems clear that there aren't enough advertisers for a radio station that uses primarily AM. On the other side of the Northsea the situation is quite different. Take Radio Hafren in Wales: their broadcasting license for the 756 kHz AM is renewed until 2020. International Report spoke with Hafren's Alistair Tyne.

Radio Hafren is a local commercial radio station, serving Mid Wales and the English border counties and broadcasting on 756 kHz (397 metres). (It's 'AM radio for mid Wales and the borders', as their slogan goes). It all began with Radio Maldwyn -The Magic 756- which began broadcasting in July 1993. It had live programs during daytime, and the Supergold service from the Chiltern Radio Network overnight. Maldwyn originally was a local community co-operative, but became a Limited Company in the late 1990s. In November 2010 the station was closed down by its owners.

Extensive range

Radio Hafren was officially launched on Christmas Day 2010 after its bid to take over the licence of the failed Radio Maldwyn was accepted. Based in Newtown, Powys, in the primarily rural setting of Mid Wales, the station has an extensive broadcasting range. The transmitter is located just to the south east of Newtown in Powys, and can be seen clearly as you travel towards Newtown from the east, the view of the transmitter to the east is obscured by trees. The transmitter is a 1kW Eddystone 6038, which was originally used by the BBC for their Radio Shropshire AM service. The mast is a guyed radiator.

Alistair Tyne of Radio Hafren: "Our licensed area is officially the old county of Montgomeryshire (this equates roughly to the northern half of the current county of Powys)." In this area with a population of about 68.000 people, Radio Hafren reaches 32.000 to 36.000 listeners each week. But as Tyne adds: "In reality our signal can be received across most of Mid Wales. During the daytime it isn't unusual for our service to be heard in North West England, The Midlands and parts of Gloucestershire, but unfortunately by dusk our signal is swamped by Deutschland Funk (DLF)." When conditions are good, the signal even flies across the water. The station had a QSL report from six kilometres south of Amsterdam.

AM for a rural area

Radio Hafren has its broadcasting license renewed until 2020, so it looks as if they still believe in the good old Medium Wave. "Our AM frequency is essential to our ability to cover our licensed area," says Alistair Tyne. "in order to cover our current AM area, we would need approximately 7 FM transmitters, and even then there would be large areas that would be left without coverage due to the terrain. We believe that the best approach for Radio Hafren in the longer term is to simulcast on both AM and FM, using FM to cover the largest population centers and AM for wider rural area that we cover. We have now been allocated an FM frequency which we are slowly working towards using."

That's also necessary because of Hafren's competitors. Tyne: "Our competition for listeners comes predominantly from the BBC, who offer their full range of FM stations across most of our area, along with their BBC Wales service on Medium Wave with a very similar coverage pattern to our own. From a commercial perspective our only competitor is Real Radio Wales who have an FM service from several transmitters in our coverage

area." Unlike in the Netherlands, the internet here is not a dominant factor yet. "Due to the very rural area we are based in, internet connection speeds for a lot of our listenership are very poor, meaning that at present for most internet radio isn't a viable alternative."

How does Radio Hafren see the role of AM broadcasting between now and 2020? Alistair Tyne: "I believe that the number of AM stations in the UK broadcasting on AM services will continue to decline, the BBC have already trailed switching off a number of AM local stations and I believe as the BBC faces further budget cuts, they will take the easy option of withdrawing AM services. I also believe that these frequencies are unlikely to be reused."

Caroline on AM?

Radio Hafren is not just a local commercial station but sees itself routed in the impressive history of commercial radio in the country. Tyne: "Commercial radio in the UK especially does owe a debt to the former pirate stations, whose very existence provided a very popular alternative to the BBC, and also proved that there was both a desire amongst the public and a market for a wider range of services than where being offered by the legitimate broadcasters of the day. This ultimately gave the government no alternative but to act and introduce commercial broadcasting."

Which leads us to the other famous broadcaster Radio Caroline, and their campaign to get an AM license from OfCom as well. Can Peter Moore's team learn anything from Hafren or is Caroline's application an entirely different matter? "We are aware of the Radio Caroline campaign for an AM frequency and it heartens us that there are still those that believe that AM broadcasting still has its place," says Tyne. "However I fear that they will for many reasons have an uphill struggle in trying to get an AM frequency. We are of the understanding that it is Ofcom policy to issue no new licenses for AM stations, this is in part due to government policy bias towards digital broadcasting in the long term. However, Ofcom is canvassing for expressions of interest for low power community stations on AM and there is also 'discussion' over the use of 648kHz in the future. They at least in part acknowledge that this frequency is not suited to low power community operation because of the size of the masts required." Therefore, Tyne thinks that an expression of interest, backed up with a suitable business plan for a more 'commercial' use of this frequency, might stand a chance.

Radio Hafren can be heard almost 24 hours a day on Medium Wave and online, bringing locally focused programs with local and national news, sport, weather, traffic and travel, what's on guides and community information. Besides mainstream pop music from the past and the present, Hafren offers specialist shows, including an hour each week of Welsh language music. Between Midnight and 2am, the output switches to a selection of programs featuring new and unsigned artists from the internet only station Celtica Radio ('the Alternative Radio Station for independent artists'), ran by Bill Everatt and his team.

www.radiohafren.co.uk
www.celticaradio.com

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