

Bishops blast RTE long-wave plans

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CATHOLIC bishops have blasted RTE chiefs over plans to stop its long wave radio service.

The cash-strapped broadcaster announced last week that it would scrap the 252 signal from October 27, focusing resources on its FM, on-line, mobile and digital services.

The move has raised fears that some people in Northern Ireland will be left with no access to RTE radio at all, with FM signals unavailable in some areas – including parts of Belfast – and medium wave transmissions controversially stopped in 2008.

Northern bishops voiced their concern when they met their southern counterparts at their autumnal meeting in Maynooth, Co Kildare this week.



Bishops' Conference spokesman Martin Long told *The Irish News* they were exercised over the short notice given by RTE and lack of consultation with listeners.

"The bishops' real concern is that people on the margins, who should be the concern of the national broadcaster, are going to be the worst affected," he said.

"Whether it's the elderly in Northern Ireland or in Britain, who have always relied on RTE for its Sunday worship programmes, these are the people that the bishops are now very concerned about."

Radio programmes should be available as clearly in Rathlin and in Rathmines. If RTE does not take people's concerns on board the net result will be a loss of listeners for good

– Martin Long

RTE intends to launch a "strong new slate of religious and spiritual content" on November 2 on its RTE Radio 1 Extra digital service.

Mr Long said while Catholic leaders accepted that the future of radio was digital, they were highly critical of the "haste of the decision" made by RTE, questioning why it wasn't flagged during the 2012 switch to RTE's Saorview digital service by TV viewers.

"RTE does not have figures, beyond guesstimates, for the size of the audience that is going to be affected by the loss of long wave," he said, adding that its long wave and FM services in the north already had "shortcomings".

The Catholic bishops have called on RTE to postpone the switch-off to ensure its audience is adequately prepared for the changeover.

Mr Long also urged the broad-

caster to work with BBC Northern Ireland to look at radio coverage throughout Ireland, saying: "Radio programmes should be available as clearly in Rathlin and in Rathmines."

"If RTE does not take people's concerns on board the net result will be a loss of listeners for good," he warned.

Meanwhile, a Church of Ireland spokeswoman said that its broadcasting committee had also discussed the issue and was drafting a letter to clergy throughout Ireland.

"The committee will be asking pastoral visitors [both clergy and lay] to engage with people who might be affected and to hand-hold them through the process of accessing digital media," she said.

"We feel that digital media is part of our future and we don't want the elderly to be excluded from that."

More information on the planned change is available at www.rte.ie/staytuned

Casting a light



■ **REELING IT IN:** Fishing as the sun goes down on Spa lake, Ballynahinch, Co Down
PICTURE: Mal McCann

Funding for new Mid Ulster council won't 'break even'

■ **BUDGET:** Chief executive of the new Mid Ulster council Anthony Tohill believes Stormont funding for the transfer of powers is inadequate



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THE chief executive of one of the north's largest 'super councils' has expressed concern about funding provided by Stormont to support the transfer of planning powers.

Former All-Ireland-winning footballer Anthony Tohill spoke out at a recent meeting of the Mid Ulster Council.

Under arrangements which come into force next April, the 11 new

councils currently sitting in shadow form will be handed a range of extra powers including planning.

Planning officials employed by the Department of Environment will move under the control of the local authorities, with 36 staff members transferring to the new Mid Ulster authority alone.

However, with the clock on the transfer of powers ticking, officials in Mid Ulster are concerned that the necessary funding is not in place.

Around £1.8m has been set aside to help the new council transfer

powers but there are concerns that will not cover the cost of bringing planning in-house.

During a recent council meeting Mr Tohill is reported to have said "planning doesn't break even".

He also said that "subvention to Mid Ulster is much lower than other areas" and warned that if "it is wrong from the start then we will have to live with that for the years ahead".

The council's presiding councillor, Cáthal Mallaghan, backed the chief executive last night.

"They have asked us to provide accommodation for DoE officials but have not told us if there's going to be a budget," the Sinn Féin representative said.

"If we keep getting budgets from central government that are not adequate to finance new responsibilities then ratepayers will have to pay for it. That would be unfair."

A DoE spokesman confirmed that officials from their department and Mid Ulster Council met this week.

"We are expecting comments from all councils very soon," he said.