

Geo-blocking of Republic of Ireland television content in Northern Ireland

Updated report to the Minister for the Economy

September 2026

Executive summary

Ofcom has revisited the availability of RTÉ and TG4 content in Northern Ireland following a request from the Minister for the Economy, Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA. We have drawn on our 2015 report on this subject and engaged with stakeholders across broadcasting, telecommunications and technical fields, both within and outside Ofcom.

The central finding is that the issues identified in 2015 largely remain. Two related constraints continue to drive Geo-blocking: territorial content rights, particularly for major sport, and the limitations of using internet protocol addresses to establish that a viewer is in Northern Ireland.

There is no single technical or regulatory solution. Some measures may reduce individual instances of blocking, but each depends on cooperation between the rights holders, broadcasters, internet service providers (ISPs) and geolocation providers.

Ofcom is not aware of any regulatory mechanism that would allow it to require an ISP to reserve IP addresses for Northern Ireland, and it has no power to require a rights holder to license content on an all-island basis.

The shift towards IP-delivered television makes this issue more important over time. We therefore consider that there may be merit in the UK and Irish Governments reviewing their 2010 Memorandum of Understanding regarding digital television services to assess whether its objectives should encompass IP-delivered services as well as digital terrestrial television.

Introduction

In May 2026, the Northern Ireland Minister for the Economy asked Ofcom to examine how Geo-blocking affects viewers in Northern Ireland, to explain the legal and technical issues, to assess possible solutions and to help bring relevant parties together. This report updates the report on Geo-blocking which Ofcom provided to the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in 2015.

Geo-blocking remains a complex issue and one over which Ofcom has limited regulatory remit. Matters of broadcasting rights are principally commercial and contractual. The design and allocation of ISP networks and IP addresses are also commercial and operational matters, subject to wider technical standards. Ofcom has therefore undertaken this work in an independent advisory and convening capacity.

To inform this update, Ofcom has engaged with a wide range of stakeholders from the broadcasting, telecommunications and technical sectors, both inside and outside Ofcom. This has included engagement with RTÉ, TG4, the BBC, Coimisiún na Meán, relevant UK government interests, telecommunications providers and technical specialists. Some information provided to us is commercially or operationally sensitive and this report therefore presents the issues at a proportionate, non-confidential level.

What has changed since 2015?

The basic causes of Geo-blocking have not materially changed. Broadcasters still need to comply with territorial rights agreements, and using an IP address to establish a user's physical location remains more reliable at country level than at sub-country level. Northern Ireland has no separate country code in the regional internet registry system for IP addresses, while ISPs' address pools and traffic routing are generally managed on a UK-wide basis.

What has changed is the scale and importance of IP delivery of television content. Audiences increasingly use broadcaster players, smart televisions, streaming devices, mobile applications and IP-based television platforms. The limitations identified in 2015 therefore affect a larger and growing part of television consumption. A programme available through a terrestrial TV signal in Northern Ireland may still be unavailable on the same broadcaster's online service at the same location.

VPN use has also become more visible. VPNs have legitimate privacy and security uses and may allow some users to make their connection appear to originate elsewhere. However, they are not a recommended solution for Geo-blocking, for several reasons: their use to circumvent territorial restrictions may conflict with platform terms and licensing arrangements; they require a degree of technical competence; good VPN services generally involve a charge; support on smart televisions is inconsistent; and broadcasters increasingly identify and block VPN traffic to enforce rights agreements.

Content rights

Territorial broadcasting rights remain the principal cause of the most prominent blocking incidents. The issue arises especially in relation to major sporting events, although its extent varies according to the sport, event, broadcaster, platform and specific rights package.

RTÉ has told us that they seek all-Ireland rights whenever these are available. TG4 has told us that they always seek all-Ireland rights in line with its statutory remit and international rights whenever these are available.

In many cases, however, international sporting organisations and their agents sell separate packages for the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland is normally included within the UK package and bespoke arrangements for Northern Ireland are not always available commercially. Where an alternative arrangement is available, the additional cost may be disproportionate for relatively small public service broadcasters.

This explains why content can be available in Northern Ireland in one circumstance and blocked in another. Overspill reception of Saorview in Northern Ireland from transmitters in the Republic carries the same schedule received in the Republic. On Freeview in Northern Ireland, RTÉ and TG4 may need to block a programme where they do not hold Northern Ireland or UK rights. Online, even content cleared

on an all-island basis can encounter a further obstacle if the service cannot reliably distinguish a Northern Ireland user from another UK user.

There may nevertheless be scope for broadcasters in the UK and Ireland, with the agreement of sporting bodies and rights holders, to develop event-specific workarounds. Such arrangements will not replace appropriate rights acquisition, but cooperation can sometimes avoid gaps where different broadcasters hold complementary coverage. For example, we understand that discussions are taking place between relevant stakeholders regarding future rights arrangements for the 2028 Olympic Games, with the aim of improving content availability for audiences in Northern Ireland where possible. Any outcome will remain subject to the agreement of rights holders and broadcasters.

IP location and online delivery

Online services commonly use an IP address as one signal for deciding where a viewer is located. An IP address identifies a connection on a network, but it is not a geographic identifier equivalent to a postcode or telephone area code.

Addresses are allocated and managed by ISPs in blocks. These blocks may change, may be shared by many users and may be routed through infrastructure in Great Britain. The scarcity and cost of public IP addresses encourage ISPs to use address pools efficiently and flexibly across their networks.

A wide range of organisations, including broadcasters, employ IP geolocation providers. They will take an internet IP address and estimate information about where that IP address is being used and what network it belongs to. They will combine IP registry information with other data to estimate a customer's location. The registry may show a UK country code or an ISP administrative address in England, neither of which establishes where the customer is physically located. Broadcasters generally use commercial geolocation databases rather than checking registry records directly. Consequently, reserving addresses for Northern Ireland users would only help if ISPs, geolocation providers, broadcasters and their rights-management providers all recognised and maintained the Northern Ireland classification.

Potential technical measures

We have considered a range of possible measures to mitigate Geo-blocking. None offers a complete, low-cost and universally applicable solution.

Measure	Assessment
NI-reserved IP address ranges	Potentially feasible for some fixed telecoms providers to ringfence IP addresses for Northern Ireland customers but is inefficient and potentially costly. It requires stable IP address allocation and acceptance by geolocation services and the rights holder's systems. Ofcom has no mechanism to compel implementation.
NI network egress or backhaul	Traffic could be routed through identifiable Northern Ireland network infrastructure. This would require ISP investment and cooperation, stable public IP ranges, and safeguards against being mistaken for VPN traffic. It could have wider service effects (potentially disrupting access to some websites).

Alternative location signals	GPS, device location, account data, postcode or ISP validation could supplement IP data. Support varies by device and smart TVs often lack GPS. Privacy, accessibility, fraud and rights-owner concerns would also need to be addressed.
Verified account scheme	Address or identity checks implemented by broadcasters could establish eligibility, but could be intrusive, create barriers for some users and remain open to misuse.
Dedicated device or access key	Dedicated set-top boxes or USB stick provided to users in Northern Ireland. Whilst this is an effective solution, it would be expensive, logistically complex, and inconvenient for users. Ireland-specific hardware specifications such as a hardcoded access key is another possible solution but would require a separate production line for Irish devices and is therefore unlikely to be feasible due to the relatively small market. A separate hardware approach is unlikely to be proportionate.
VPNs	Useful technology for legitimate purposes, but unreliable and unsuitable as a public-policy fix. Services may block them, televisions may not support them, and their use may conflict with contractual territorial controls.

The role of Internet Service Providers

It may be technically possible for some ISPs to ringfence a pool of addresses for customers in Northern Ireland or to adopt network-level routing arrangements. However, feasibility will differ by provider and architecture. Northern Ireland customers represent a relatively small proportion of the customer base of many UK-wide providers, while there are numerous fixed and mobile providers serving the market.

Ringfencing would reduce flexibility in the use of a scarce and expensive resource and could require network redesign, operational maintenance and coordination with third-party databases. Based on the evidence available to us, we would not expect providers to adopt such an approach voluntarily, absent a clear commercial or policy incentive and confidence that broadcasters and rights holders would recognise it. Ofcom is not aware of any regulatory mechanism that would allow us to require ISPs to reserve IP addresses for Northern Ireland for this purpose.

A network-level solution would generally be preferable to a user-operated workaround because it could be frictionless and more inclusive. Even so, it would not overcome a broadcaster's lack of rights to show content in Northern Ireland, and it could not guarantee that every service would classify users correctly.

Consumer impact and public service access

The impact of Geo-blocking on audiences is not uniform and it is difficult to produce a robust single figure for the number of affected viewers. Availability varies by programme and by platform, while the same household may use terrestrial television, satellite, cable and several IP devices. Broadcasters have told Ofcom that complaints and public attention tend to increase around high-profile sport, particularly where coverage has strong relevance to audiences in Northern Ireland or where an event is not available from another broadcaster.

The issue remains important to local audiences. RTÉ and TG4 have an established place in the media landscape of Northern Ireland, and the cross-border availability of services supports cultural, linguistic and public service objectives. As television viewing migrates online, a mismatch between terrestrial and IP availability risks widening rather than narrowing unless rights and location mechanisms evolve together.

Conclusions and recommended next steps

Our conclusions are as follows:

- The principal findings of Ofcom's 2015 report remain substantially relevant today. Territorial rights and imperfect sub-country IP geolocation are still the two central constraints.
- Broadcasters continue to face difficulty securing rights for major sports events on an all-Ireland or all-island basis. The structure and price of rights packages are largely controlled by international rights holders.
- Technical measures can mitigate some online blocking, but no measure resolves both rights and location. Any effective approach requires coordinated participation by broadcasters, ISPs, geolocation providers and rights holders.
- Reserving Northern Ireland IP address ranges may be technically feasible for some providers, but addresses are scarce and expensive, implementation could be disproportionate, we would not expect providers to adopt it voluntarily absent a strong incentive, and Ofcom is not aware of any regulatory mechanism that would allow it to require them to do so.
- VPNs should not be presented as a solution. They are not reliable, universally accessible or readily compatible with territorial licensing and broadcaster controls.
- Event-specific cooperation between UK and Irish broadcasters may offer limited practical workarounds where sporting bodies and rights holders agree.
- The growing shift from terrestrial and satellite to IP delivery increases the strategic importance of the issue.

We recommend continued dialogue between the UK and Irish Governments, broadcasters, relevant sporting organisations, ISPs and technical providers.

Most importantly, Ofcom considers that there may be merit in the UK and Irish Governments considering whether the objectives of their 2010 Memorandum of Understanding on digital television services remains fit for a media environment increasingly characterised by IP-delivered services. The MoU helped enable the wider availability of RTÉ and TG4 through digital terrestrial television in Northern Ireland, but it predates the present scale of IP viewing and is focused only on traditional terrestrial distribution. A refreshed MoU could set a high-level shared objective of sustaining widespread access to Republic of Ireland public service content in Northern Ireland across IP-delivered platforms, subject to rights and legal constraints.

Such a commitment would not in itself change broadcasting rights contracts or the workings of ISP networks. It could, however, provide a clearer policy framework for cooperation, strengthen the position of broadcasters when engaging with rights holders and technical partners, and ensure that the original all-island public service objective is not eroded as content delivery becomes increasingly internet-based.

More broadly, the UK government is currently examining the future of TV distribution. The [Watch this Space: A new strategic direction for UK media](#) green paper and consultation was published in June 2026. It outlines plans for a managed transition of the UK's television distribution network away from traditional Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT / Freeview) toward Internet Protocol Television (IPTV). We have engaged with government on Northern Ireland-specific issues related to any transition and will continue to do so.

Annex: Scope and limitations

This report is an advisory assessment based on stakeholder engagement and technical input available to Ofcom in 2026. It is not a legal determination and does not disclose commercially confidential information. Technical feasibility and cost will vary by provider, while programme availability will continue to depend on the terms of individual rights agreements.

Ofcom has not independently verified all technical and commercial information provided by external stakeholders.