

# NOISE POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN WALES

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Noise, soundscape, air quality and other previously siloed areas of devolved policy now sit, not in a vacuum, but within the overarching sustainable development framework set by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (“the WFG Act”)<sup>1</sup>.

Since Acoustics 2018, the Welsh Government has adopted a new five-year Noise and Soundscape Action Plan<sup>2</sup> as the Welsh public sector’s central noise policy document. The Welsh Government has also issued Planning Policy Wales<sup>3</sup> (PPW) edition 10, which completely reframes national planning policy in Wales in line with Well-being of Future Generations principles.

The Welsh Government is committed to providing further policy guidance and technical advice to support the new planning policy in PPW relating to air quality and soundscape. This will be achieved through a review of the current Technical Advice Note (TAN) 11: Noise and the production, currently under way, of a new, replacement TAN11 covering air quality, noise and soundscape.

## 2 THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

### 2.1 What we mean by sustainable development

The WFG Act requires public bodies in Wales, including the Welsh Government and local authorities, to carry out sustainable development. This is the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the seven national well-being goals. These goals, established through primary legislation, are a prosperous Wales, a resilient Wales, a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales, a Wales of cohesive communities, a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language, and a globally responsible Wales. The sustainable development principle means acting in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Five ways of working must be followed when carrying out sustainable development. These are:

- looking to the long term;
- taking an integrated approach;
- involving a diversity of the population in the decisions affecting them;
- working with others in a collaborative way to find shared sustainable solutions; and
- acting to prevent problems from occurring or getting worse.

Each public body must set and publish objectives designed to maximise its contribution to achieving the well-being goals, and must take all reasonable steps to meet those objectives.

The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales' role is to act as a guardian for the interests of future generations in Wales, and to support the public bodies listed in the WFG Act in working towards achieving the well-being goals.

## **2.2 Assessments of local well-being**

The WFG Act puts on a statutory footing public services boards made up of local authorities, local health boards, fire and rescue services and Natural Resources Wales. Each public services board must improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of its area by contributing to the achievement of the national well-being goals. Each public services board must carry out an assessment of local well-being. It must then set well-being objectives and implement a local well-being plan. Like the individual public bodies listed in the WFG Act, each public services board must publish an annual report on the progress made towards meeting its well-being objectives.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (Assessments of Local Well-being) Regulations 2017 require public services boards to take into account the most recent strategic noise maps made under the Environmental Noise (Wales) Regulations 2006 and adopted by the Welsh Ministers when they carry out their assessments of local well-being.

## **2.3 A UK Future Generations Act?**

A UK Future Generations Bill has recently been laid in the House of Lords as a Private Members' Bill (<https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2019-21/wellbeingoffuturegenerationsbill.html>).

For further information on the UK Bill, visit: <https://www.bigissue.com/tag/future-generations/>

# **3 NOISE AND SOUNDSCAPE POLICY**

## **3.1 Noise in Wales**

Every minute of every day, even when we are asleep, our state of well-being is dependent upon the many sounds that surround us.

Noise, meaning unwanted or harmful sound, can, in the short term, disrupt sleep and increase levels of stress, irritation and fatigue, as well as interfering with important activities such as learning, working and relaxing. In other words, it reduces the quality of our lives. Exposure to loud sounds can cause hearing damage, while exposure to noise in the long term can increase our risk of hypertension-related illnesses and cardiovascular disease.

Environmental noise has been ranked by the World Health Organization as the second biggest environmental contributor to the burden of disease in Europe after air pollution. Our own noise maps (<http://lle.gov.wales/map/airbornepollution>) suggest that the homes of more than 200,000 people across Wales are exposed to road traffic noise levels exceeding the WHO's 2009 night noise guidelines.

According to the National Survey for Wales 2017-18, 24% of people in Wales are regularly bothered by noise from outside their homes. Of these:

- 36% are regularly bothered by neighbours inside their homes;
- 47% by neighbours outside their homes; and

- 45% by traffic, businesses, or factories.

People who live in urban areas are more likely to be bothered by noise than those who live in rural areas. People are more likely to be bothered by noise if they live in social housing or rent privately as opposed to owning their own home. Those who live in flats, particularly converted flats, are more likely to be bothered by noise than those who live in detached or semi-detached homes, and people are more likely to be bothered by noise if they live in materially deprived households or in deprived areas. People who own their own property are more likely to be regularly bothered by noise from traffic, businesses or factories than people living in social housing, but people living in social housing are more likely to be bothered by noise from their neighbours. (See Annex B of the Noise and Soundscape Action Plan 2018-2023 for a more detailed analysis of the results of the National Survey noise question.)

We intend to ask the noise question again in our National Survey after a few years have passed. This should give us an indication of how the perception of noise in Wales is changing over time. It will be particularly instructive to identify any long-term changes in public attitudes to noise arising following the experiences of the Covid-19 lockdown.

### **3.2 Soundscape**

The evidence outlined above leads to the conclusion that noise has a significant impact on the well-being of our citizens, and we must improve decision-making in this area. But the last thing the Welsh Government wants is a Wales that is silent. Our lives are enhanced by conversation, laughter and cheering, music and the sounds of nature. A healthy acoustic environment is more than simply the absence of unwanted sound, and noise management must have a broader focus than simply clamping down on the decibels. We need to create appropriate soundscapes, meaning the right acoustic environment in the right time and place. The towns and cities in which most of us live serve us in a variety of ways, and should therefore contain a variety of soundscapes appropriate to the place. There should not be a one-size-fits-all urban soundscape, which we experience wherever we go, any more than every street and building should look alike.

Soundscape is defined in ISO 12913-1:2014 as the acoustic environment as perceived or experienced and/or understood by a person or people, in context. The Welsh Government has adopted this definition in its noise and planning policy documents.

### **3.3 The Noise and Soundscape Action Plan**

The Noise and Soundscape Action Plan 2018-2023 is the central noise policy document in Wales. It states the Welsh Government's expectation that public bodies subject to the WFG Act should follow the five ways of working in that Act when carrying out noise and soundscape management. This means:

- Pursuing long-term, enduring solutions to any existing instances of noise nuisance;
- Seeking to manage noise and soundscapes at the same time as achieving other, related outcomes;
- Taking opportunities to talk to the public about the challenges associated with exposure to noise and unhealthy soundscapes, listen to their concerns and seek their views on potential solutions and their involvement in delivering them;
- Working actively with internal and external partners to mutual benefit in the delivery of desired outcomes; and

- Keeping exposure to noise (that is, unwanted or harmful sound) as low as reasonably practicable across the whole of the population, looking out in particular for areas where noise levels might qualify as a statutory nuisance or noise action planning priority area, or where public amenity might be adversely affected by noise at some point in the future, and acting pre-emptively to prevent those things from happening.

### **3.4 Integrating noise and air quality policy**

The Noise and Soundscape Action Plan says that by defining environmental noise as an airborne pollutant within our Clean Air Programme, we will create and pursue any opportunities to further align noise/soundscape and air quality policy and regulation in Wales over the course of the next five years, in order to achieve multiple benefits from our actions.

Environmental noise has much in common with air pollution. The new Clean Air Plan for Wales<sup>4</sup> reiterates that the sources of air and environmental noise pollution tend to be either identical or else closely linked, their transmission pathways are similar, and the most affected receptors are also often the same, typically the people situated closest to the source.

For road traffic travelling at a fixed speed, emissions of both air and noise pollution increase or decrease in proportion to the number of vehicles. The noisiest and dirtiest vehicles are often the same, as are the quietest and cleanest. The levels of both air and noise pollution are highest at the road itself and fall off with distance. Buildings and terrain can obstruct or channel both air and noise pollution. Traffic travelling at very high speeds and congested traffic can result in high levels of both air and noise pollution. In addition, some adverse health effects have been linked to both air and noise pollution, for example increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

For all these reasons, it makes sense to consider both forms of airborne traffic pollution together. Pursuing them separately would at best result in duplication of effort and missed opportunities, at worst in the implementation of conflicting policies.

The purpose of air quality management is to improve human health and quality of life. This improvement to health and quality of life will be greater if improved soundscapes are achieved alongside reductions in air pollution.

In January 2020 we published a report<sup>5</sup> compiled for us by Extrium, which provided us with updated advice on the potential synergies and conflicts between noise and air quality management.

## **4 LAND USE PLANNING**

### **4.1 Planning Policy Wales**

The Welsh Government published PPW edition 10 in December 2018, to ensure that the planning system in Wales maximises its contribution to the seven well-being goals and five ways of working defined in the WFG Act and thereby creates sustainable places.

The focus on placemaking in PPW requires that policy topics such as air quality, noise and soundscape be considered alongside all other relevant policy topics when preparing development plans and designing and determining planning proposals. Development plan strategies, policies and development proposals should be formulated and designed to protect and enhance the special characteristics and intrinsic environmental qualities of places because they contribute to the attractiveness, vibrancy, liveability, resilience, functioning, economic prosperity and ultimately health, amenity and well-being of places.

Planning policy in relation to air quality, soundscape and noise emphasises the requirement to secure opportunities as part of the planning process, rather than just avoid the worst negative impacts. It is no longer acceptable to regard air quality and noise merely as technical matters to be mitigated at the end of the process. Rather, they are integral to the design, functioning, health, amenity and well-being of places. Accordingly, an integrated approach should be taken towards drawing up strategies and formulating proposals for places, including those relating to air quality and soundscape.

## **4.2 Post-Covid-19 planning policy in Wales**

On 16 July 2020, the Welsh Government published a planning policy position statement<sup>6</sup> on placemaking and the Covid-19 recovery. It confirms that Covid-19 has not changed the Welsh Government's policy direction towards better places and placemaking. In fact, the pandemic crisis has highlighted the need for good quality places for people to live, work and relax in. It has further emphasised the importance of the quality of our living and working environments and how much more they matter as we require more flexibility to support new working, living and learning needs. Whilst there is undoubtedly a need for economic recovery, which the planning system should facilitate, this should not be at the expense of quality, both in terms of health and well-being and in response to the climate and nature emergencies.

If we forego our policy commitment to quality, we risk repeating previous errors in allowing development on unsustainable sites in areas which did not have the infrastructure or connections to enable us to live active, healthy lives and promote better well-being in every sense.

The development industry has its part to play in improving the design and quality of schemes being presented to the planning system. Asking ourselves, "Could I live my whole life here? Will this place meet my needs and that of future generations?" is a good first test. This is then followed by meaningful engagement with communities and the local planning authority on the design of a scheme. Finally, a commitment to following through on infrastructure obligations will go a long way in ensuring that the developments envisioned are delivered and the wider public benefits are maximised.

The Welsh Government's July 2020 planning policy position statement calls on local planning authorities to be bold in their visions for the future which they set out in their local development plans. It says that plans should not roll forward unsustainable spatial strategies or be identical to neighbouring authorities' plans, rather they should actively embrace the placemaking agenda set out in PPW. Each plan should be unique to an area, identifying its character, strengths and areas which need improving, and set out policies which improve these.

## **4.3 Technical advice for planners and developers**

PPW is supplemented by a series of Technical Advice Notes (TANs) and other guidance, which, together with PPW, comprise the national planning policy in Wales.

In both its Noise and Soundscape Action Plan 2018-2023 and its new Clean Air Plan, the Welsh Government has committed to providing further policy guidance and technical advice to support the new planning policy in PPW relating to air quality and soundscape. We will achieve this through a review of TAN11: Noise (currently equivalent to the withdrawn 'PPG24' guidance in England) and the production of a new TAN11 covering air quality and soundscape as well as noise pollution.

This new TAN is currently in preparation, and will support the placemaking focus of PPW. The Welsh Government recently ran a public call for evidence<sup>7</sup> to inform the development of the new TAN. Its scope was limited to the provision of information, views and evidence required to inform the development of the new TAN and support the implementation of current planning policy in PPW

relating to air quality, soundscape and noise. It was not a call for evidence to reopen the published policy position in PPW, which remains as currently drafted.

The new TAN itself will be subject to consultation later on in 2020, and a brief summary of the evidence and information received through the call for evidence will be published.

## 5 REFERENCES

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4. Welsh Government, The Clean Air Plan for Wales: Healthy Air, Healthy Wales. (August 2020). <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-08/clean-air-plan-for-wales-healthy-air-healthy-wales.pdf>
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6. Welsh Government, Building Better Places: The Planning System Delivering Resilient and Brighter Futures – Placemaking and the Covid-19 recovery. (July 2020). <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-07/building-better-places-the-planning-system-delivering-resilient-and-brighter-futures.pdf>
7. Welsh Government, Call for Evidence: Review of Technical Advice Note 11 Noise, to incorporate Air Quality and Soundscape. (February 2020). <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2020-02/consultation-review-of-technical-advice-note-11.pdf>