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Communicating noise mapping and action planning to politicians and the public

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ABSTRACT

Beyond the acoustics community, the reasons for, and implications of, the noise mapping and action planning processes are little understood. Yet communicating noise mapping and action planning is a requirement of the END. Surveys show that many find traffic noise annoying/disturbing, but the perception of the public, some policy makers and professionals is that not much can be done. Clear, appropriate communication of the purpose of strategic noise mapping and how it can be used to engage both decision makers and the public in reducing noise is the first step towards quieter and healthier urban and rural environments. Raising awareness of the ways in which the impact of environmental noise, and the noise itself, can be reduced, are also crucial in engaging a wider community in actively working to reduce noise. We are all noise makers and can all contribute. This paper sets out how Environmental Protection UK are working with UK and European partners to communicate the impacts of noise on our health, and the practicalities of reducing the impact of traffic noise in our towns, cities and countryside.

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental Protection UK (formerly the National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection) is the environmental protection charity supported by pollution control professionals. We have been working for a cleaner, quieter, healthier world since 1898. Our members include local authorities, policy makers and business interests engaged in noise management and control. We work closely with government in Scotland and across the UK and Europe in developing reliable policies for managing the impact of noise, and in raising awareness of noise issues to the public and policy makers. Our organisational goal is to promote integrated policies and practices that encourage the effective management and control of noise. We aim to raise the profile of noise in the UK and to increase the profile of noise in European and international policy. This paper gives an overview of the mechanisms used by us and by partner organisations to raise awareness of the impacts of environmental noise and how all can contribute to reducing the impacts of this noise.

2. PROMOTING NOISE ISSUES

The impacts of noise are too frequently neglected – whether it is in planning and transport decisions or housing, industrial and energy infrastructure development – major power stations or microgeneration. The Environmental Noise Directive aimed to introduce a process across Europe that is now starting to address these issues. However, its effective implementation goes beyond acoustics – beyond measurement metrics and mapping. The strategic mapping process indicates locations that merit priority attention, but noise attenuation measures have to be addressed by the authorities and interests at local level. In order to effectively reduce noise the creators of our urban environment need to

understand that decisions taken now will affect the noise climate of the future – these are spatial planners, developers and managers of transport infrastructure, local decision makers, and finally the general public, for whom these systems are designed to serve. We need to work to embed planning for a good noise climate into disciplines beyond acoustics by demonstrating that there is much we can do to prevent significant noise problems arising and that prevention is far easier and cheaper than retrofitting barriers and insulation or re-directing traffic.

3. WHY COMMUNICATE NOISE MAPPING?

The END stipulates that noise mapping and action planning should be an inclusive process and that public awareness of environmental noise impacts should be raised. The Directive sets out to fulfill the Community policy “to achieve a high level of health and environmental protection, and one of the objectives to be pursued is protection against noise.” We believe that in order to achieve optimum protection against the effects of noise, citizens must be aware of the impacts, how they can be mitigated and who is responsible for achieving this. The END itself very clearly states that noise mapping should be actively and openly communicated.

Table 1: What the Environmental Noise Directive 2002/49 EC says about communicating noise mapping

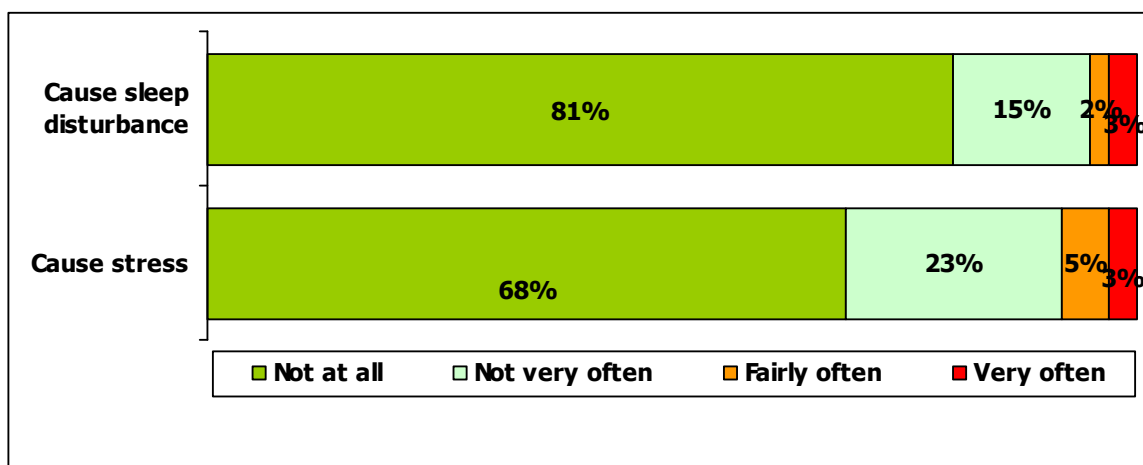
Purpose of the END		
	11	Action plans should address priorities in those areas of interest and should be drawn up by the competent authorities in consultation with the public
	12	In order to have a wide spread of information to the public, the most appropriate information channels should be selected.
Article		What member states should be doing
1.	Objectives	(b)ensuring that information on environmental noise and its effects is made available to the public
8.	Action Planning	7. Member States shall ensure that the public is consulted about proposals for action plans, given early and effective opportunities to participate in the preparation and review of the action plans, that the results of that participation are taken into account and that the public is informed on the decisions taken. Reasonable time-frames shall be provided allowing sufficient time for each stage of public participation.
9	Information to the public	1. Member States shall ensure that the strategic noise maps they have made, and where appropriate adopted, and the action plans they have drawn up are made available and disseminated to the public in accordance with relevant Community legislation, in particular Council Directive 90/313/EEC of 7 June 1990 on the freedom of access to information on the environment(13), and in conformity with Annexes IV and V to this Directive, including by means of available information technologies.
		2. This information shall be clear, comprehensible and accessible. A summary setting out the most important points shall be provided.

The noise mapping process is technically complex – however the overall aim of the process is simple – to reduce the exposure of people to environmental noise, and this is what must be communicated to the public, together with the available practical measures that are available to us.

A. Public Attitudes

Past and recent public attitude surveys on noise have demonstrated that a large proportion of the public are bothered by traffic noise. Most recently, an ICM poll undertaken by Environmental Protection UK found the following:

Table 2:: *How often if at all: Does traffic noise cause you stress/Does traffic noise cause you sleep disturbance (All respondents 1002)*



Of people questioned in Great Britain in spring 2009, it was found that 1 in 5 (20%) of people said that traffic noise disturbs their sleep at some time, with 5% of people saying it disturbs their sleep fairly or very often, and 1 in 3 (31%) of people said that traffic noise causes them stress, with 8% saying that this occurred fairly or very often. Also, 59% of those polled think traffic noise has increased in the last five years. On quiet areas, 58% thought traffic noise acceptable outside as long as they felt relaxed, and 91% believe our existing quiet spaces need protecting.

Raising awareness of the noise mapping and action planning process, and our short and longer term solutions for noise mitigation and, equally important, of educating the public on what our realistic expectations should be for environmental noise, is crucial in gaining public and political, support for the work of the policy makers, noise managers and acousticians charged with making the END work.

3. HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE NOISE MAPS?

Much of the information being used to inform the noise action planning process is technically complex. Measurement metrics, the rationale behind them, and the question of which are the best fit for the job in hand are repeatedly debated by acousticians and technicians. However, beyond our specialist community these metrics are essentially meaningless. Politicians, planners, highways/transport managers and the public simply need to be able to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy levels of noise. Article 9 of the END states *“This information shall be clear, comprehensible and accessible. A summary setting out the most important points shall be provided.”*

Work has been undertaken by the Commission to suggest clear comprehensible ways of communicating noise. The European Commission Working Group on Assessment of Exposure to Noise (WG-AEN) has drawn up a position paper on Presenting Noise Mapping Information to the Public². This parallels with the way in which air quality information has been presented – suggesting a colour banding system representing differing ranges of decibels – that will give the public an indication of how noisy this is. (A similar system is also being suggested by NGOs for noise labelling of tyres – and has been supported by MEPs). A descriptive system is also suggested:

Table 3: Example from WG – AEN of descriptors for the effects of noise

L _{den}	L _{night}	Description
50-54dB	40-44dB	Noise is likely to be noticeable but generally it will not be considered overly intrusive in urban areas. In rural areas it may be considered intrusive because of higher expectations for quiet.
55-59dB	45-49dB	Generally the noise is becoming intrusive even in an urban environment.
60-64dB	50-54dB	Generally the noise will be regarded as high but not exceptionally so in urban areas.
65-69 dB	55-59dB	Generally the noise levels are likely to be regarded as high even in urban areas.
70-74dB	60-64dB	Generally the noise will be regarded as highly undesirable.
≥75dB	≥ 65dB	As noise increases the adverse effects become even more significant in terms of serious disturbance.

In the UK noise maps produced by the administrations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are now available online. The END states that “In order to have a wide spread of information to the public, the most appropriate information channels should be selected.”

While information is available for those who already know about the process, simply placing information online is not active communication. Whilst maps have been released, and in England draft noise action plans are out for consultation, to truly comply with the communication objectives of the END, much more active engagement is required if aspirations for an inclusive noise action planning process are to be achieved.

Environmental Protection UK is working to encourage the inclusion of environmental noise in UK transport and planning policy, through engagement with officials and politicians and responding to consultations on emerging policy. In general we are disappointed that local environmental impacts, and noise in particular, remain neglected in the rush to address climate change issues. However, in April this year we were encouraged to note that one of our proposals had found its way into the current draft of our Department for Transport’s 5 key goals and challenges for the development of the UK’s transport infrastructure – it has now included the goal to: “Reduce the number of people and dwellings exposed to high levels of noise from road networks, consistent with implementation of Action Plans prepared under the Environmental Noise Directive”. We continue to work for similar considerations to be included in planning policy, as the UK planning system is undergoing major reform. Through lobbying in partnership with other concerned UK organisations (the

Council for Protection of Rural England, LACORS (the Local Authorities Coordinators of Regulatory Services), the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and the Environmental Law Foundation) – we have had some small success to date.

4. HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE NOISE ACTION PLANNING?

While working to establish the existence of the END in wider policy thinking, we are also rightly tasked by the END with addressing the engagement of all relevant stakeholders (ie everyone in agglomerations and around major transport routes as well as the noise generating authorities) in the noise action planning process. The ‘most appropriate information channels’ need to be selected accordingly. At Environmental Protection UK we are doing our best to raise awareness of noise issues at all levels:

Table 4: *Channels used to communicate noise issues*

Channel	Mechanism/Material	Target Audience/Reach
Specialist Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UK Noise Committee • UK National Noise Forum • NGO partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • our members - UK noise specialists • officials • non government organisations (NGOs) • academics
Events (both organised by us and others)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conferences • seminars • workshops • consultation events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UK/local government officials • national and local politicians • acousticians • academics • ngos/campaign groups • planning and transport specialists
Publications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • leaflets • surveys • reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • noise specialists • government officials • politicians • general public • anyone who doesn't understand noise issues!
Online information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organisation website • interactive education tools • downloadable resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • noise specialists • noise sufferers • policy makers • journalists • Anyone interested...
Lobbying (often in partnership with other ngos/professional bodies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Picking up the phone • Meetings • Letter writing • All Party Parliamentary Noise Reduction Group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • government officials • UK politicians • MEPs • engaging industries
Campaigns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noise Action Week • Quieter Tyres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • noise makers and noise sufferers • drivers and fleet operators

Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press releases • Briefings • Personal contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • print • radio • television • online
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To ensure all of the intended audiences are reached – all of these channels are used as appropriate (and as resources allow).

A. Printed information

Print still has its place – and is essential in engaging the wider public. Not everyone has immediate internet access, (and not everyone sits at a desk with immediate access all day). With funding from the UK administrations in England, Scotland and Wales, we have produced an information leaflet – “Managing Transport Noise in Cities”³ – which explains the noise mapping and noise action planning process, and the remedies available to us to reduce noise. This is being distributed to local authority areas affected by first round noise mapping, to agencies who should be involved, and to local and national decision makers. In 2008 we drafted ‘Towards Quieter Cities’⁴ in partnership with the European Federation for Transport and the Environment and the European Environment Bureau. This is an information sheet explaining noise mapping and action planning, with Europe wide case studies of noise reduction initiatives; it is intended for use by NGOs and lobbyists working across Europe to raise public awareness of the issues.

B. Consultation events

Environmental Protection UK in Scotland worked with the Scottish Government to host consultation events on noise action planning, and a launch event for the Scottish noise maps. In England, during September we administered a series of six consultation events across the country, which covered first round areas mapped for noise. These events attempted to engage specialists in environmental health, transport and planning and local interest groups in the noise action planning process.

C. Online information

Online information is important as an instant reference point for researchers (media, policy, political). What we do know is that people are interested in noise; for example the noise and nuisance pages of our organisational website are by far the most popular, the table below reports our web statistics from July 2009:

Table 2. Visits to Environmental Protection UK website – noise pages

Parameter	Popularity - visits
Top news items	Noise is harming our health 238 Commission rejects air quality derogations 110
Pages visited	Homepage: 3535 Noise pollution: 1969 Car pollution: 492
Landing pages	Homepage: 2363 Noise pollution: 1554 Neighbour noise: 742
Unique visits to content pages by subject	Noise: 4378 Nuisance: 1121 Air Quality: 993

As an organisation we work on air quality, contaminated land and noise. Our web stats demonstrate that there is a huge interest in noise and how it can be prevented, and that we are making some progress with communicating noise issues. The noise pages of our website generate at least twice as much interest as air quality, and we all need to work at communicating this public concern about noise to decision makers.

5. COMMUNICATING NOISE AT LOCAL LEVEL – UK EXAMPLES

While nationally we can raise awareness of the overall impacts of noise and the management challenges this presents, locally people are affected by specific problems. Decibel levels do not necessarily represent impact – so engaging local specialists and communities is essential if resources are to be directed at tackling those priority areas where environmental noise is having the greatest detrimental effect.

A. Greater London

In 2008 the Greater London Authority commissioned research on noise and health impacts which found that up to 108 heart attacks a year can be attributed to traffic noise. Aside from a presentation to a specialist audience last summer, and an upload to an obscure page on the GLA website, this work was barely disseminated beyond the acoustics community. This is not active public dissemination.

B. Bristol

Bristol City Council have undertaken noise mapping and are working to engage the public in thinking about quiet open spaces as part of the Citizenscape project (a European Parliament funded e-participation project). This is looking at ways to engage the public in defining quiet areas, and work includes an online facility, <http://www.bristol.citizenscape.net/core/>. The website has been promoted through local radio and press, with community facilitators being used to engage hard to reach groups. With funded support, Bristol are using a comprehensive marketing approach to engaging the public in the noise action planning process.

C. Environmental Protection UK

As a UK wide organisation with a local divisional structure, we are using a range of communication channels both centrally and locally to raise awareness of the noise action planning and noise mapping process. This ranges from press releases commenting on the work as it develops, inputting into consultations and engaging politicians to providing public information leaflets for UK and European audiences. We also co-ordinate an annual Noise Action Week to raise awareness, and in 2008 formed a partnership with 'Walk to School Week'. This took on a 'Sound Detectives' theme, which engaged children in thinking about their noise environment on their walk to school. We are now planning to produce a teaching resource for secondary schools on transport noise.

6. CONCLUSION

As previously stated, communicating the complexities of noise mapping may seem daunting. However, we need to look beyond the technical difficulties that the process has presented to using our knowledge to inform non-acousticians that, far from being neglected, a huge amount of work had been, and continues to be, put into assessing noise levels and impacts. We need to be constructive in communicating the practical methods of noise mitigation available, in working to manage realistic expectation for noise in our mechanised and mobile society and in promoting action to reduce noise by the noise

makers – and that is all of us. Also, we need to communicate clearly, using mechanisms that will reach the people affected and in everyday language that can be understood.

REFERENCES

1. Attitudes to Traffic Noise, ICM 2009, Environmental Protection UK, May 2009
2. Presenting Noise Mapping Information to the Public – A Position Paper from the EAA WG on Assessment and Exposure to Noise, March 2008
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4. Towards Quieter Cities – European Federation for Transport and Environment, European Environment Bureau 2007