

NOISE AND SOUNDSCAPE POLICY DEVELOPMENTS IN WALES

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1 TOWARDS AN AIR QUALITY AND SOUNDSCAPES ACT

1.1 The case for legislating

The Environmental Noise Directive, retained in Welsh law in the form of the Environmental Noise (Wales) Regulations, is more than twenty years old. It has helped move noise policy forward in a number of important ways. These include highlighting the extent of population exposure to transportation noise, and its resultant health effects, and driving innovations in computer modelling. But as a driver for government noise policy generally, the Directive has its limitations: It ignores forms of noise, notably neighbour noise, which are less easy to map, but may be just as detrimental to the well-being of the population as transportation noise. The evolution of strategic noise mapping under the Directive has precluded comparisons being made from one round of noise maps to the next. The industrial noise maps required by the Regulations are of questionable value to decision-makers. The Directive does not set out what the five-year noise action plans it requires to be produced are expected to achieve in practice. It focuses attention on sound levels and quiet areas rather than soundscape quality. It gives greater attention to big cities than to smaller settlements. And it doesn't link up with EU air quality legislation.

We have addressed some of these shortcomings by going further than the Directive requires. We produced a national [Noise \(and Soundscape\) Action Plan](#) in 2013 and 2018, covering all forms of airborne sound across the whole of Wales, rather than limiting ourselves to the narrowly defined action plans required under the Regulations. We supplemented the strategic noise maps with evidence on neighbour noise obtained through the National Survey for Wales in 2017-18 and 2021-22 (see Figures 1 and 2). In 2022, we made use of Defra's new Noise Modelling System and commissioned Noise Consultants Ltd (NCL) to map all roads and railways across Wales (see Figures 3 and 4) and establish a national model that has the potential to be updated and re-run to generate comparable outputs in subsequent years. And we have linked up noise and air quality policy through [statutory guidance on local air quality management](#) issued in 2012 and 2017, and revisions to [Planning Policy Wales](#) made in 2018.

The commitment to pass a Clean Air Act for Wales within this Welsh Parliament (Senedd Cymru) provides us with an opportunity to put much of what we have done voluntarily over the last decade on a statutory footing. The scope of the proposed Act has been widened to cover the air environment more fully, by including airborne noise and soundscape. As introduced to the Welsh Parliament, what is now the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill makes provision for Welsh Ministers to produce a national strategy on soundscapes (our Noise and Soundscape Plan) covering all forms of airborne sound in Wales, with its five-year review cycle aligned with that for the national air quality strategy (our Clean Air Plan) and the electoral cycle of the Welsh Parliament. Mirroring the national air quality strategy, local authorities and other relevant Welsh public authorities will have to have regard to the policies in the national strategy on soundscapes when exercising any function of a public nature that could affect soundscapes in Wales.

By putting the Noise and Soundscape Plan on a more complete statutory footing through this Bill, we will enable future Welsh Governments to focus their attention on whatever aspects of noise and soundscape policy are judged the highest priority for government attention. Each new or revised Plan will need to be evidence-based and developed transparently and collaboratively with stakeholders. If Ministers wish to do so, they may produce an integrated national strategy for the air environment, covering both air quality and airborne sound.

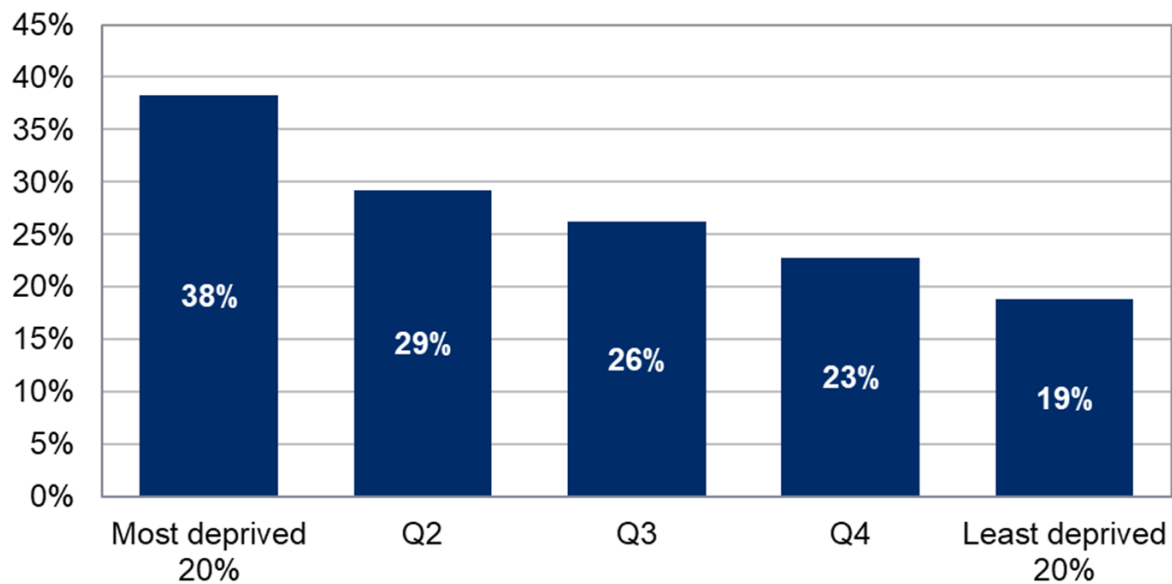


Figure 1 Proportion of people in Wales who are regularly bothered by noise from outside their homes, by area deprivation status (Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation), according to the National Survey for Wales 2021-22

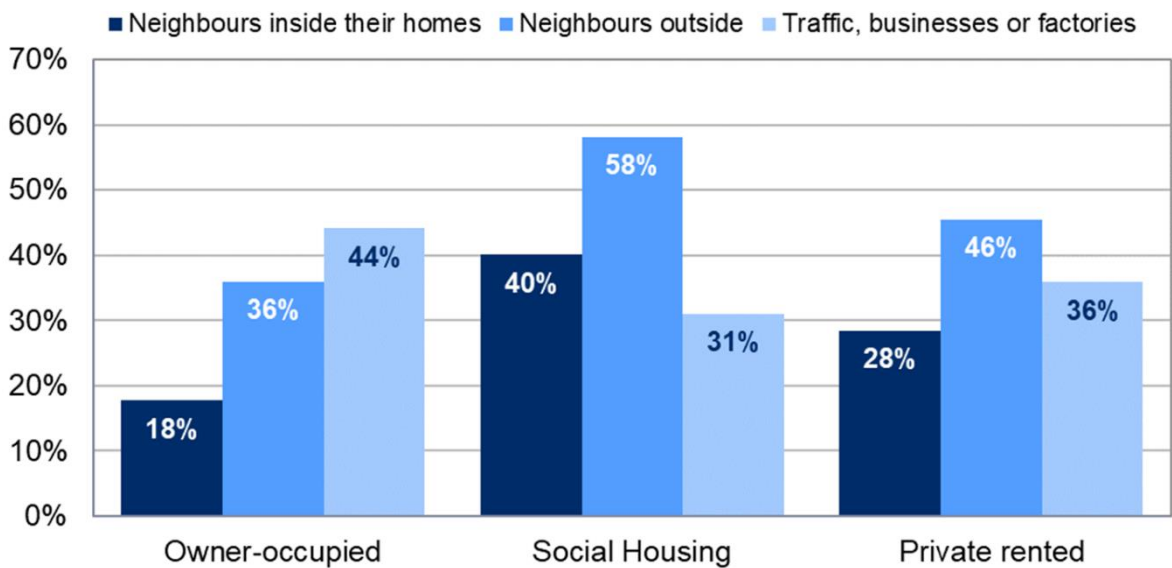
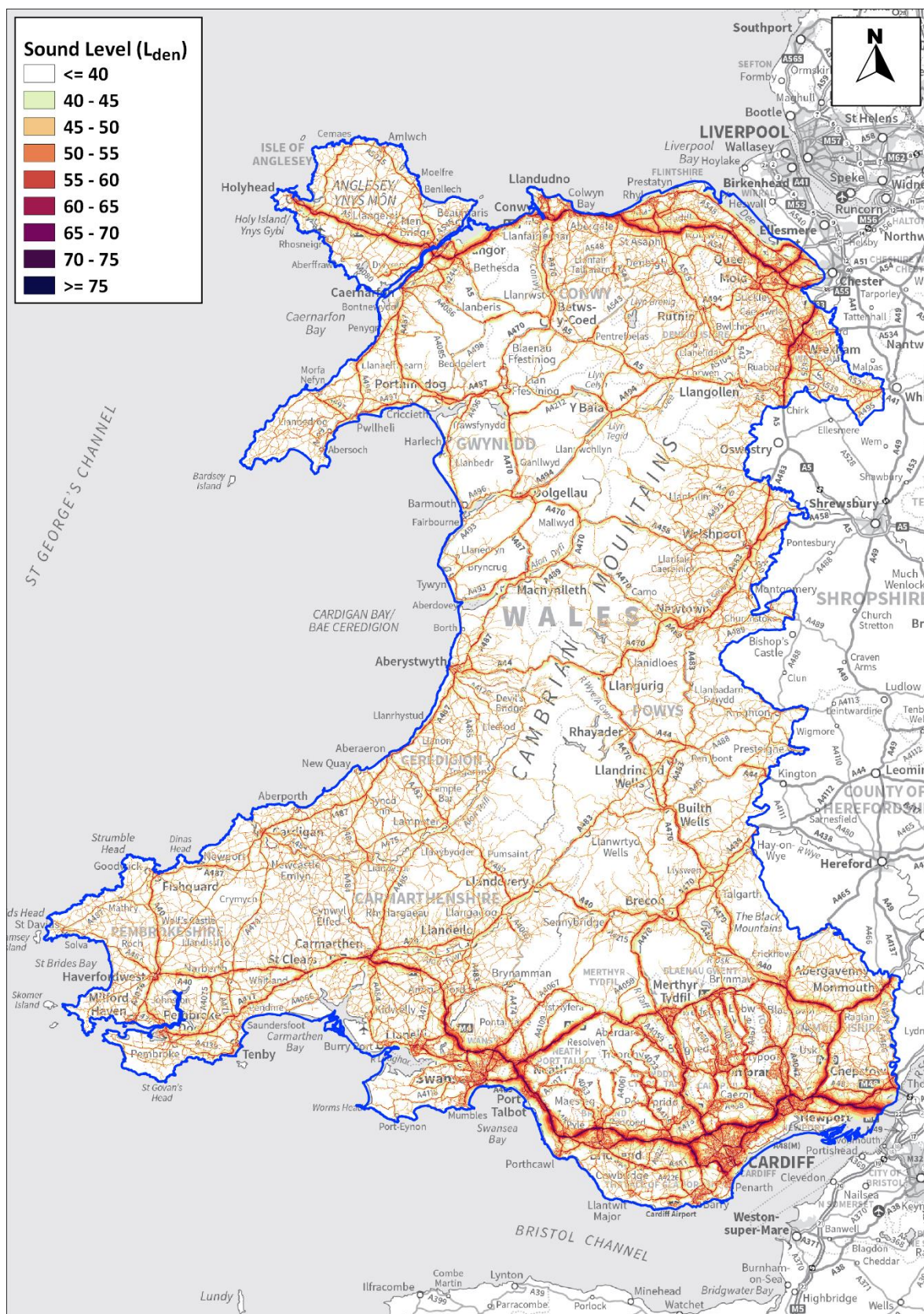
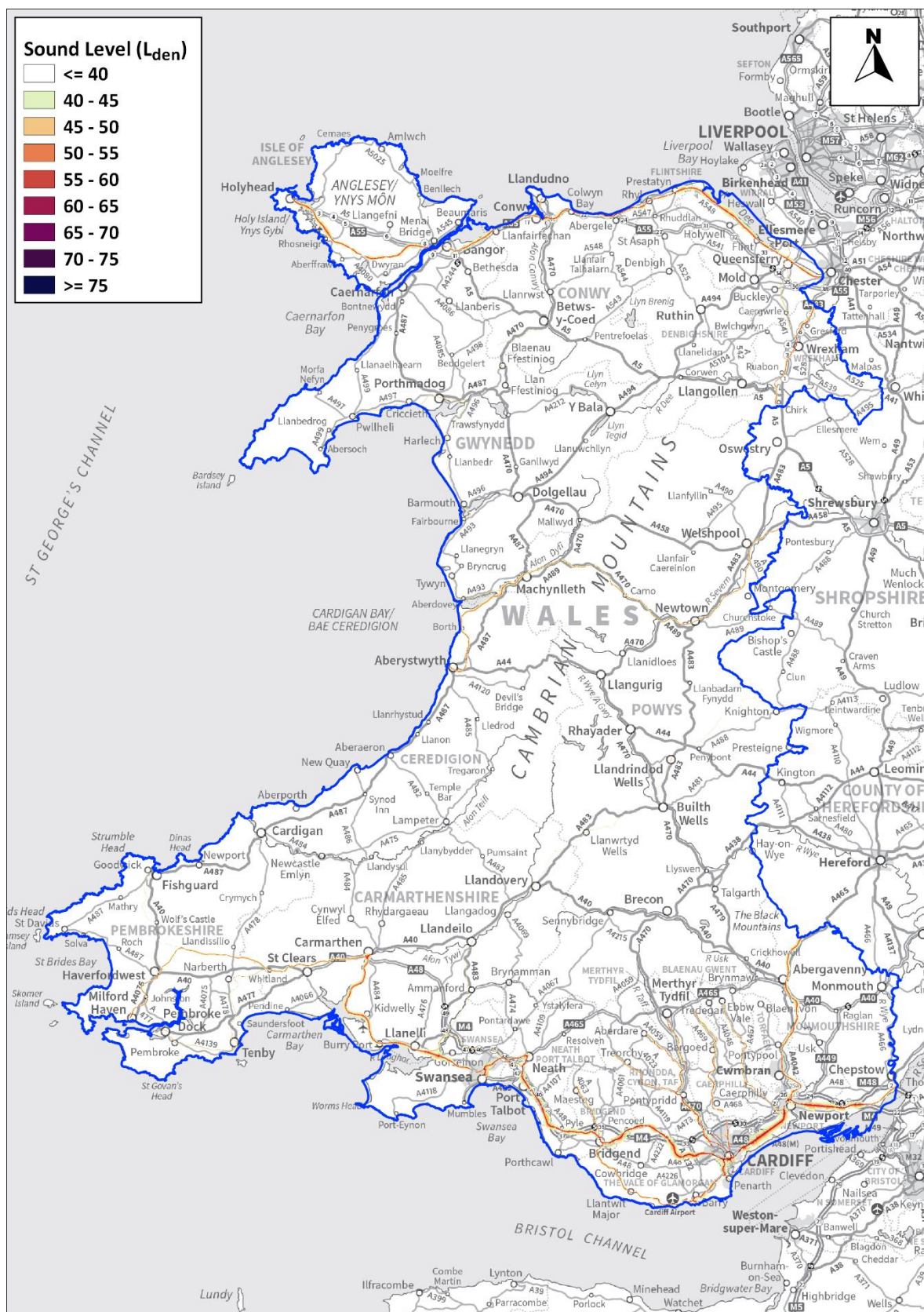


Figure 2 Type of noise affecting people in Wales who are regularly bothered by noise from outside their homes, by tenure, according to the National Survey for Wales 2021-22



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Figure 3 Road noise in Wales, mapped by NCL using Defra's Noise Modelling System



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Figure 4 **Railway noise in Wales, mapped by NCL using Defra's Noise Modelling System**

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1.2 The progress of the Bill

The progress of the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill towards becoming an Act can be tracked on the [Welsh Parliament's website](#).

The Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee of the Welsh Parliament has led the early stages of the Bill's scrutiny. It carried out a consultation on the content of the Bill. The [consultation responses](#) received include submissions from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH), the Institute of Acoustics (IOA), the Acoustics Group at University College London and the Noise Abatement Society. The IOA and CIEH also gave verbal evidence to the Committee. A [Senedd Research article](#) on the Bill, published in June, reported that evidence heard by the Committee showed support for the inclusion of soundscapes in the Bill, with many acknowledging the links between air quality and noise.

The Welsh Parliament was in recess during July and August, and scrutiny of the Bill resumed in September.

2 TOWARDS A NATIONAL SOUNDSCAPES STRATEGY

2.1 The draft Noise and Soundscape Plan

The Noise and Soundscape Action Plan 2018-2023 (NSAP) was adopted on 4 December 2018 and is due to be replaced by 4 December 2023.

The [draft Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028](#) retains and refines the core messages of the NSAP. These include:

- our ambition being appropriate soundscapes;
- our commitment to embed the five ways of working in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015; and
- our commitment to join up action on noise and air quality wherever it makes sense to do so.

The draft 2023 Plan covers new topics that have come to the fore within the last five years, such as issues around remote working, aural diversity, air source heat pumps, changes in speed limits, and fireworks. It also sets out what we have delivered over the last five years, such as noise mitigation works completed on the trunk road network.

Developments in planning policy and guidance, notably work towards publishing and implementing a new Technical Advice Note (TAN 11) and related soundscape design guidance, on which we [recently consulted](#), are also included in the Plan, as are our latest noise maps and results from the National Survey for Wales 2021-22.

The draft Plan recommends that the methods outlined in British and international soundscape standards (such as the soundwalks and questionnaires set out in Annex C of ISO 12913 Part 2) be used in a targeted manner, to deliver whatever information on people's perception of their sound environment is considered of practical benefit to decision-makers in Wales on a case-by-case basis. The Welsh Government believes that people will experience the benefits of a transition from traditional noise control to a more inclusive soundscape-based approach when they can see public bodies in Wales taking on board local communities' views on their sound environments, in terms of both what they value and what they think needs to be improved.

2.2 Consultation on the draft Plan

In consulting on our draft Noise and Soundscape Plan, we did more than just seek views on what we had already drafted. We also posed some big open-ended questions, to inform noise and soundscape policy over the next five years and build towards a revised national strategy on soundscapes in 2028. These asked:

- What do you think would be the characteristics of a village, town or city that had achieved “appropriate soundscapes”? What are the main barriers or obstacles to achieving appropriate soundscapes in reality? How should we seek to overcome those barriers?
- What do you think it would look like in practice, if decision-makers followed the five ways of working in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act when carrying out activities that may affect soundscapes? Can you give examples of how a public body in Wales might demonstrate all five ways of working when taking a decision that is likely to affect people’s sound environment?
- How do you think society should address in a fair and balanced way the dilemma of sound generated in the course of people’s lives being experienced by other people – including people with autism and those who work night shifts – as unwanted noise?
- Which actions being taken by the Welsh Government and local authorities over the next five years to improve air quality in Wales do you think present the greatest opportunities to deliver additional benefits in terms of noise reduction and better soundscapes? What more do you think we should be doing (if anything) to link up noise and air quality policy in Wales?
- Do you think we are striking the right balance for now between avoiding creating new burdens for public authorities and businesses in Wales, and driving the transition from traditional noise management practices to a more soundscape-centred approach that puts people and context at the heart of decision-making?
- In preparing a draft Noise and Soundscape Plan for the next five years, are there any important points relating to Wales’s airborne sound environment that we have missed? For the topics that we have covered, do you disagree with any of the items that we have outlined in the draft Plan?
- If we were to establish an expert advisory panel on soundscapes (as some have suggested), what would be your top five questions for the panel to consider in the five calendar years from 2024 to 2028? Are there any items that you feel need to be prioritised, and if so, why?

The consultation closed on 2 October, and a summary of the responses received will be published in due course.

3 REFERENCES

1. Welsh Government, Noise and Soundscape Action Plan 2018-2023. (December 2018).
2. Welsh Government, Local Air Quality Management in Wales: Policy guidance. (June 2017).
3. Welsh Government, Planning Policy Wales: Edition 11. (February 2021).
4. Welsh Government, Noise and Soundscape Plan for Wales 2023-2028: Our national strategy on soundscapes (consultation draft). (June 2023).