

# **NEXT STEPS FOR NOISE AND SOUNDSCAPE IN WALES – WHAT DOES IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT (AIR QUALITY AND SOUNDSCAPES) (WALES) ACT 2024 MEAN FOR THE FUTURE OF SOUNDSCAPES IN WALES?**

Jenna Turnbull Senior Local Air Quality, Noise & Soundscapes Policy Manager, Welsh Government

Philip Bowen Deputy Director, Environmental Protection, Welsh Government

## **1 ESTABLISHED PRINCIPLES OF NOISE AND SOUNDSCAPE POLICY IN WALES**

A healthy sound environment is more than simply the absence of unwanted sounds, noise management must have a broader focus than simply reducing the decibels. The cities, towns and villages in which we live contain a variety of sound environments, which should be appropriate to time and place. There should not be a one-size-fits-all sound environment, which is experienced everywhere, any more than every street and building should look alike.

## **2 THE LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY ENVIRONMENT IN WALES**

Wales recognises that effective soundscape management can have a wide range of benefits to peoples' health and well-being. The Welsh Government committed to introducing a Clean Air Bill as part of its Programme for Government priorities and, following public consultation, it was agreed that noise and soundscapes should be included as part of this process due to the close links between air quality and airborne sound, also considering the impacts that both air quality and noise and soundscapes will have on people's health and well-being.

The [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#) includes an obligation to involve the local population in decisions which affect them, taking an integrated approach, so creating a Wales combined of cohesive communities. The concept of soundscape, and their assessments, acknowledges how different people will experience sounds differently in different contexts. These fit particularly well in the wider Welsh legislative and policy landscape and the methods to establish peoples' preferences set out in the British and international soundscapes standards being focussed on understanding a local community's needs rather than rigidly set scientific targets. Wales has been the first UK country to introduce primary legislation on sustainable development and enshrine ways of working and well-being goals such as these into legislation across all policy areas. Traditional approaches to noise control in UK legislation have not considered local context, positive sounds and non-acoustic factors affecting human experience to the extent that our soundscape approach does.

The [Environment \(Air Quality and Soundscapes\) \(Wales\) Act 2024](#) was given Royal Assent and became law in February 2024. It introduced legislative obligations for noise and soundscapes management, a world-leading move which reflects our commitment to protecting and improving the soundscapes of Wales. This is the only example to date of soundscapes appearing in law across the UK. The soundscapes sections within the Act were among the first to come into force on 14 April and are now in the process of being implemented by the Welsh Government's [Noise and Soundscape Plan for Wales](#).

Published in December 2023, the latest Plan sets out our current national strategy for soundscapes, including our expectations for public bodies in relation to this area of work. Our goal

now is to continue to work with partners to deliver appropriate soundscapes, the right sound environment in the right time and place in practice for the benefits of communities and citizens.

From January to April 2024, the Welsh Government ran a consultation seeking views on how we intend to strengthen environmental governance in and further address climate change and biodiversity loss in Wales. This [consultation White Paper](#) contained proposals to:

- embed environmental principles in Welsh law;
- establish an environmental governance body; and
- introduce targets and statutory duties for the protection and restoration of biodiversity in Wales.

The White Paper listed the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Act as one of three key pieces of environmental law in Wales that reflected the Welsh Government's commitment to achieving a cleaner, greener and more resilient Wales. For example, in terms of the soundscapes sections of that Act, the White Paper suggested that the new duty to create a national soundscapes strategy could support biodiversity through limiting the disruption caused by noise pollution to noise-sensitive protected species such as bats and potentially expand suitable bat habitat (which would be unsuitable otherwise due to noise levels preventing the bats from hearing to forage for food). This is an example of how work in one policy area can help to deliver multiple objectives and how the Welsh Government is dedicated to extending soundscape management principles into wider environmental policies.

The [consultation outcome](#) has since been published, and an [oral statement](#) on the legislative programme on 9 July confirmed that we will be bringing forward an environmental principles and biodiversity Bill. This will establish a statutory environmental governance body for Wales, embed environmental principles into Welsh law and introduce a legal duty with targets to protect and restore biodiversity. We will take account of these emerging environmental principles and governance arrangements as we implement the Noise and Soundscape Plan.

### 3 WHAT DOES THE 2024 ACT DO?

The commitment to pass a Clean Air Act for Wales within this Welsh Parliament (Senedd Cymru) provided 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 Act was widened to cover the air environment more fully by including airborne noise and soundscape.

As passed by the Senedd the Act makes provision for Welsh Ministers to produce 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 Senedd. Mirroring their national air quality strategy obligations, local authorities and potentially other relevant Welsh public bodies (see below) will have to have regard to the policies in the Noise and Soundscape Plan when exercising any function of a public nature that could affect soundscapes in Wales.

By putting this Plan on a more statutory footing through this Act, it has enabled current and future Welsh Governments to focus attention on whatever aspects of noise and soundscape policy are judged the highest priority for government attention. Each new or revised Plan will be evidence-based and developed transparently and collaboratively with stakeholders.

## 4 IMPLEMENTING THE ENVIRONMENT (AIR QUALITY AND SOUNDSCAPES) (WALES) ACT 2024 IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS (WALES) ACT 2015

Noise and soundscape policy in Wales sits not in a vacuum, but within the cross-cutting framework set by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (the WFG Act). This requires a specific duty of public bodies, such as local authorities, health boards, Natural Resources Wales (NRW), Public Health Wales (PHW) and the Welsh Government, namely “to carry out sustainable development”. This means “the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle<sup>1</sup>, aimed at achieving the seven well-being goals<sup>2</sup>” A key part of our work has been considering how these well-being goals can be recognised and incorporated into policy development.

### Ways of working

Acting in accordance with the sustainable development principle involves following five ways of working which are enshrined in the WFG Act. These are:

- looking to balancing short-term needs with the need to safeguard the ability to also meet long-term needs;
- taking an integrated approach, by considering how your well-being objectives may impact upon each of the well-being goals, on your other objectives, or on the objectives of other public bodies;
- involving people with an interest in achieving the well-being goals, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the specific area;
- acting in collaboration with any other person, or different parts of your organisation, that could help you meet your well-being objectives; and
- acting to prevent problems from occurring or getting worse.

The [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015 \(Public Bodies\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2024](#) has now added the following to the list of public bodies subject to the WFG Act, meaning there are now 56 public bodies required to carry out sustainable development and follow the five ways of working when doing so:

- the Welsh Ambulance Services University NHS Trust
- Digital Health and Care Wales
- Health Education and Improvement Wales
- Social Care Wales
- the Welsh Revenue Authority
- Transport for Wales
- Centre for Digital Public Services Limited
- Qualifications Wales

The Welsh Government must have due regard to the above principles in the development and implementation of policy, which allows us the ability to collaborate and embed our priorities across subject areas. One of the seven well-being goals, A Healthier Wales – defined in the WFG Act to

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

mean "a society in which people's physical and mental well-being is maximised and in which choices and behaviours that benefit future health are understood" helps us to recognise mental well-being as a priority in our policy development and to help achieve this we are working closely with colleagues in Health to ensure soundscapes' policies are considered across our shared policy areas.

## 5 EARLY IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMITMENTS IN THE NOISE AND SOUNDSCAPE PLAN

The Plan sets out several priority actions for the Welsh Government and partner organisations to implement over the period from 2023 to 2028. In the first year, progress has been made in relation to several of these, including the following:

In January 2024, the Welsh Government issued a [written statement](#) and published reports produced for us by Sustainable Acoustics Ltd and Apex Acoustics Ltd on the evidence around [noise from domestic air source heat pumps \(ASHPs\)](#). Since then officials have been continuing to engage with [Microgeneration Certification Scheme](#) (MCS) to help ensure that the noise assessment methods used for domestic ASHPs in the UK are updated in a way that will provide sufficient confidence for us to consider a review of the rules for permitted development rights for ASHPs in Wales. On 25 June 2024, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government and Planning agreed to review permitted development rights for air source heat pumps, off street electric vehicle charging infrastructure, reverse vending machines, temporary campsites and natural flooding.

We have been contributing to the ongoing work of the British Standards Institution Committee B/564 to review and update *BS 8233: Guidance on sound insulation and noise reduction for buildings*. Also working with the Institute of Acoustics to develop the potential syllabus and assessment questions for what we hope will emerge as the UK acoustics profession's first certificate of competence in soundscape assessment.

Building on observations in the Plan around the complex interaction between different indoor environmental health risks, including noise, extremes of temperature, excessive moisture and indoor air pollutants, the Environmental Public Health sub-group of the Chief Medical Officer's Health Protection Advisory Group is looking at indoor environmental quality (IEQ) holistically across the Welsh Government with the aim of promoting more joined-up working on IEQ policy in Wales.

Turning to natural soundscapes, NRW has continued to publish further outputs from its ongoing [Tranquillity & Place](#) mapping project, with Theme 4 focusing specifically on the sound environment across Wales. It is expected that the Tranquillity & Place resource will inform the writing of the next State of Natural Resources Report to be prepared by NRW under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016.

## 6 NEXT STEPS

Progressing active consideration of soundscapes within environmental protection policy across Government is the next key priority following the enactment of the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Act 2024.

The Local Air Quality Management local authority guidance is in the process of being amended and updated and will include noise and soundscapes guidance. This is aimed to better support

authorities to embed soundscape legislative obligations into their existing processes. Alongside this, resource is being sought to undertake an exercise to help review and engage with authorities to consider the skills gaps needed for implementation of this embedding process. Further information on this will be available in autumn 2024.

Anti-idling regulations and supporting guidance, which are currently in development, will allow for consideration of the impacts of vehicle noise on our community soundscapes.

Finally, Welsh Ministers have a duty under the 2024 Act to promote awareness of air pollution. We are working with stakeholders to develop a delivery plan setting out how we will promote awareness of the risks to human health and the natural environment caused by air pollution, alongside ways of reducing and limiting air pollution. Commitments made through the delivery plan may provide opportunities to further develop synergies between clean air and soundscapes policy, for example in supporting public health and well-being.

We are also now considering what the future of soundscape policy in Wales will look like. In delivering a national policy on soundscapes, we believe that we need to consider ways to preserve, encourage and enhance the opportunities for appropriate and healthy soundscapes across Wales.

In order to do this, we are considering a number of key prompts:

- In creating a long-term vision for soundscapes in Wales, what are the key indicators we should be using?
- What will success look like?
- How can this success be achieved, taking into account innovative ways of working, collecting and considering data to meet the needs of our communities?
- Do our partners and public bodies hold the skills and knowledge to help us achieve success?

Throughout the remainder of 2024, officials will be using these prompts to shape the future policy, building on the achievements of the Noise and Soundscape Plan and using the powers now supported by statute to strengthen and bolden our commitment to the preservation and enhancement of soundscapes across Wales.

Acousticians and social scientists working in the field of soundscapes in academia, consultancy, the public sector and non-governmental organisations have important roles to play. They will be key in developing and disseminating soundscape assessment and design tools, training and examples of good practice that will enable practitioners to confidently implement local and national soundscape policies when exercising their decision-making functions. To be successful in delivering against our aims, we need to listen to the skills and expertise of these partners. We look forward to working with a diverse range of IOA members to continue making a success of our soundscapes' policy over the coming years.

## 7 REFERENCES

1. [The Well-being and Future Generation Act \(Wales\) 2015](#) (June 2015)
2. [Environment \(Air Quality and Soundscapes\) \(Wales\) Act 2024 \(February 2024\)](#)
3. [Noise and Soundscape Plan for Wales 2023-2028](#). (December 2023).
4. [Environmental principles, governance and biodiversity targets: White Paper | GOV.WALES](#) (April 2024)
5. [Environmental Principles, Governance and Biodiversity targets for a Greener Wales White Paper: A Welsh Government response to the White Paper](#) (July 2024)
6. [Oral Statement from the First Minister of Wales: The Legislative Programme](#) (July 2024)
7. [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015 \(Public Bodies\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2024](#) (June 2024)

## Proceedings of the Institute of Acoustics

8. [Publication of the “Air Source Heat Pump Noise & Permitted Development Rights in Wales” report \(phase 1 & 2\)](#) (January 2024)
9. [Tranquillity and Place report, Natural Resources Wales](#) (March 2022)