

From the Ministries

NEW EVIDENCE FROM WHO ON HEALTH EFFECTS OF TRAFFIC-RELATED NOISE

Traffic-related noise accounts for over 1 million healthy years of life lost annually to ill health, disability or early death in the western countries in the WHO European Region. This is the main conclusion of the first report assessing the burden of disease from environmental noise in Europe, released 30th March by WHO/Europe. Noise causes or contributes to not only annoyance and sleep disturbance but also heart attacks, learning disabilities and tinnitus.

“Noise pollution is not only an environmental nuisance but also a threat to public health,” said Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe. “We hope that this new evidence will prompt governments and local authorities to introduce noise control policies at the national and local levels, thus protecting the health of Europeans from this growing hazard.”

Among environmental factors in Europe, environmental noise leads to a disease burden that is second in magnitude only to that from air pollution. One in three people experiences annoyance during the daytime and one in five has disturbed sleep at night because of noise from roads, railways and airports. This increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases and high blood pressure.

The new publication presents the results of an international study, coordinated by WHO/Europe and supported by the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC), that reviews the evidence on health effects, provides guidance to quantify risks from environmental noise and estimates the burden of disease in western European countries. Better surveillance and data collection are needed in south-eastern Europe and central Asia, where a lack of exposure data inhibits estimates of the extent of health effects in these parts of the Region.

“This new review of evidence is WHO’s contribution to the policy process in the European Union. We hope that it can influence the update of the European Union directive to include stricter limit values for noise pollution, and that it can be extended to other parts of the Region,” commented Rok Ho Kim, Scientist, Noise and Health at WHO/Europe, who coordinated the WHO project to draw up the report.

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PARLIAMENT BEGINS SCRUTINY OF EU AIRPORT NOISE RULES

European Commission plans to ease noise restriction measures around airports has been met with scepticism by the MEP in charge of the dossier in Parliament, who believes the EU executive is placing economic considerations above citizen’s concerns.

The European Commission wants

to end the “many inconsistencies” as to how noise restriction measures are put in place across the EU, saying they may hinder the development of extra capacity in the bloc’s already crowded airports.

“Decisions on cutting noise levels have to balance protection for citizens living close to airports against the needs of those who wish to travel,” the EU

Executive said in December when it presented its 'Better Airports' legislation package.

The package included a new EU regulation that seeks to bring more transparency in decisions over noise restriction measures, in line with guidelines developed by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

"Residents are entitled to be protected from excess noise from airports but it is necessary to take into account costs in terms of lost capacity and the impact on economic growth in a region," the Commission argued.

Together with more flexible airport slots and ground-handling rules, the EU executive hopes to unleash the development of Europe's airports, bringing €5 billion to the European economy and creating up to 62,000 jobs by 2025.

The European Parliament will soon start scrutinising the draft regulation. But the MEP in charge of the dossier appears sceptical about the Commission's motives.

"I think the motivation behind this regulation is to ... have fewer restrictions than there are now. I think that is the real intention of the Commission," said Jörg Leichtfried, a socialist MEP from Austria who is in charge of steering the draft noise regulation through Parliament.

According to Leichtfried, the Commission has put economic

considerations above all else when drafting the regulation, an objective he does not adhere to. "Costs that are raised by noise restrictions - that shouldn't be the question," he said.

"I do not think personally that there are too many restrictions in place," he said.

The Commission, for its part, claims it wants to bring more transparency to the decision-making process and avoid noise restrictions measures that are "inconsistent" with other objectives - such as flight safety or the environment.

"This is not about targets, but about the decision-making process," the Commission says.

One key aspect of the new regulation is that it forces decision-makers to be independent from any stakeholder. "Airports would no longer be allowed to take decisions on operating restrictions," said Helen Kearns, spokesperson on transport issues at the European Commission.

In addition, "the consultation of citizens living around airports would become mandatory" while local residents would have to be kept "regularly informed on progress of noise mitigating measures".

National authorities will still be able to place restrictions on flights if they want. According to the the EU executive, the new regulation, "gives the Commission a scrutiny role - it does not replace a member state's final decision."

GOA CHIEF MINISTER URGES RELAXING NOISE POLLUTION ACT

The Goa Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar has said he has requested Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to relax the noise pollution act in certain areas to facilitate full-fledged music tourism. Parrikar said his government would identify areas, which are far away from residential areas, where music can be allowed till late at night. He said the

mandatory ban is affecting Christian weddings as their functions continue till late at night. The Noise Pollution (Control & Regulation) Rules, 2000 completely bans playing loud music between 10 pm and 6 am. "Our government is requesting the Union government to relax the laws in certain areas so that tourism is not affected. Special Tourism Zones can be created where there is no population... We assure there would be no disturbance," he said.

WHAT DOES A REGULATOR REGULATE?

At a residents meeting Cole Landouski, of the Altadena County (CA) Department of Public Health, clarified what noise nuisances his department could regulate. Persistent noise above 50 decibels in a residential area, loud

parties, noisy pool pumps, are among the nuisances the department can deal with. Other common complaints are not his responsibility – loud boomboxes in cars, only if the car is stationary; leaf blowers are exempted under the county code; barking dogs are a problem for the county's Animal Control department.

COMMISSIONERS APPROVE ENFORCEABLE NOISE ORDINANCE

Chelan County Commissioners (WA) tried to solve that paradox when they approved a new resolution that puts some teeth into noise control in the county without restricting commerce. The new resolution makes it unlawful to unreasonably create “loud, raucous, frequent, repetitive or continuous sounds that exceed a reasonable person standard so as to disturb or interfere with the peace, comfort and repose of another.” It replaces a 1970 ordinance that was too vague to enforce, commissioners said. A deputy would be

the judge of what is unreasonably loud, commissioners said. Commissioner Doug England said commissioners wanted to keep the law as reasonable as possible. A major problem with the old rule, England said, was that it didn't really establish guidelines for enforcement. If a deputy was called to or ran across a loud party and then arrested teens for underage drinking, those cases could be thrown out because the deputy did not have good reason to be there. Commissioners also wrote into the rule that they want to control noise in a way that also promotes commerce, community events and local values and traditions.

FROM PROGRESSIVE PENALTY TO FLAT FINE

Allentown (Pa) fines for noise ordinance violations will now change from a progressive fine that increases for repeat offenders to a flat penalty of \$100 for all offenders. Previously, the city issued fines of \$25 for first offenses, \$50 for

second-time offenders, \$100 for third-timers and \$250 for subsequent offenses. But that system proved too cumbersome and time-consuming for city police officers to track, and was not worthwhile because there were only “a handful” of repeat offenders, city officials said.

COUNCILS NOT RECOGNISING NOISE AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL HAZARD

During 2011 noisedirect made a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, to 98 councils, including all London boroughs, outer London councils and all councils in the south east. The request asked councils to answer 6 questions.

The purpose of the request was to find out how councils are complying with their duty under the Housing Act 2004; to inspect properties for

psychological hazards from noise and take appropriate enforcement action, by serving Improvement or Hazard Awareness Notices.

Noisedirect spokeswoman, Val Weedon, said: “Noisedirect has been receiving more and more calls in recent years, with the majority of them simple noise nuisance cases that councils could've dealt with. Local authority cuts and the introduction of the Localism Act has now given councils an excuse to look at ignoring their statutory duties when it comes to noise complaint services. So the results from our

enquiries about their duties in relation to the Housing Act came as no surprise. This is a real shame as the Housing Act was a useful tool when dealing with poor sound insulation, a problem that results in many noise complaints.”

From answers received, Noisedirect found that in 2010 Councils:

- Served a total of only 4 notices under the Housing Act 2004, for psychological hazards from noise.
- 1 Council responded to say that there are no psychological

hazards from noise in its area, which is why no inspections were carried out.

- 81% of Councils did not undertake any inspections for psychological hazards from noise.
- 95% of Council did not take any enforcement action under the Housing Act 2004 for psychological hazards from noise.

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LACK OF AWARENESS OF TINNITUS AND DANGERS OF LOUD MUSIC

A survey of the listening habits in the UK reveals most people do not know how much damage loud music can do to their hearing.

Action on Hearing Loss surveyed 1,000 people throughout the UK and 83 per cent said they'd suffered from temporary tinnitus and had 'ringing in their ears', but one in five would only 'be a bit worried' if they got tinnitus permanently. There is also a general lack of awareness as 80 per cent of people admitted they did not know loud music can damage their hearing or cause tinnitus.

The UK charity is especially concerned about the dangerous volume levels of people's mp3 players. From next year, it will become EU Law that all new mp3 players have a maximum default volume setting of 85dB. But the research revealed that one in three

people would override this setting even though this could result in damaging their hearing or developing tinnitus.

The key findings from the survey are:

- 83% have had ringing or buzzing in their ears.
- 19% are only worried 'a bit' about it.
- 87% listen to personal music players.
- 76% are not aware of the EU regulations that from 2013 all mp3 players have a default maximum setting.
- 34% would override the setting.
- 80% would change their behaviour if they knew about the dangers of listening to loud music.

It recently hit the headlines after Coldplay lead singer Chris Martin and Plan B supported the campaign and admitted they suffered from tinnitus from listening to loud music for too many years without hearing protection.

AIRCRAFT NOISE LIMITS MAY STOP NEW HOMES

An airport that does not exist and a suburban airfield could stop vast tracts of land from becoming the solution to Sydney's housing crisis. Extended noise restriction zones being considered by aviation authorities reveal that if Badgerys Creek is selected as the site for the city's second airport, the state government would be unable to build

homes on 99sq km zone within the southwest growth region. The draft federal guidelines, currently before the National Airports Safeguarding Advisory Group, reveal a plan to classify an extra 128sq km of Sydney as affected by aircraft noise without a single flight pattern change. New suburbs would be added to the noise zones surrounding Sydney Airport, which experts predict will have a dampening effect on real

estate values. Development would also be banned on any greenfield site within the extended zones. The Urban Development Institute of Australia NSW found that under the new contours, 97sq km of land around Sydney Airport and 10sq km around Bankstown airport would be reclassified

as affected. "What the Commonwealth government is proposing is a series of giant footprints across Sydney that will sterilise large tracts of land for development in greenfield areas and dictate what infill development takes place," UDIA chief executive Stephen Albin said.

CALL TO PRAYERS LOUDNESS DOESN'T NEED REGULATION

No regulations should be drawn-up to force mosque caretakers to lower the volume of their speakers used to broadcast adzan (the Muslim call to prayer), Indonesian lawmakers have said. Chairwoman of the House of Representatives' Commission VIII overseeing religion and social affairs, Ida Fauziah, said the obligation to turn down the volume during the call to prayer should be left to the management at mosques and prayer houses. "I don't think we need an official regulation, be it a local ordinance or law, to regulate the volume of speakers used in broadcasting the call for prayer. Let the mosques' managers decide for themselves how loud the volume should be. There shouldn't be one standard level because each mosque has a different environment," she said. Commission VIII deputy chairman, Surahman Hidayat, of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) added that reducing the volume of speakers during a call to prayer would lessen the meaning of the Muslim prayer ritual. "The point of using speakers is to be loud so that people can hear the call to prayer. If they can already hear us, than we don't need the call to prayer. Adzan is part of the Muslim ritual, and that ritual is a given, so I don't think we need to limit the volume," he said. Surahman also said that criticism of loud adzan was outrageous. "I disagree that a loud call to prayer is annoying because it's only five to 10 minutes for five times-a-day. The loud broadcasts in fact help to remind people of prayer times," he said. Contacted separately, Jakarta administration spokesman Cucu Ahmad Kurnia said it would be impossible to introduce a strict regulation to limit the volume of adzan, adding that it was a very sensitive issue. "There are some local ordinances regarding public order, including one passed in 2007. However, adzan is not regarded as a public disturbance given the sensitivity of the issue. Some people might be annoyed by it but most of us, who live in a predominantly Muslim country, still need it," he said. The 2007 Bylaw on Public Order includes provisions on noise produced by business activities, firecrackers and motorized vehicles. A 1996 Environment Ministry regulation stipulates that noise levels in each residential area should be no higher than 55 decibels.

CLUB ACTUALLY LOSES LICENCE

A Nottingham city club is set to be stripped of its licence after playing music too loud and making residents' lives "a misery". Nottingham City Council ruled that Club Unique in Broadway, Lace Market, should have its licence revoked at the June licensing panel meeting. This means it will no longer be able to sell alcohol or offer entertainment. The news follows numerous complaints from neighbours. Steve Hughes, who owns a nearby flat, said his life had been "made a misery" by the "continuous noise". Councillor Brian Grocock, chairman of the licensing committee, said: "Lots of consultation took place with the environmental health noise officers. Lots of recommendations were made that were promised but never materialised."

£8000 FINE FOR OUT OF HOURS NOISY WORK

A building contractor has been fined £8,000 for conducting noisy working outside of agreed hours in Melksham. ISG Pearce built an extension at Sainsbury's Bath Road store last year and admitted five instances of breaching a noise control order in November 2011, during a hearing at North West Wiltshire Magistrates' Court. The court heard that noise complaints were first received by the council from nearby residents last July. On November 11, Wiltshire Council issued a notice under the Control of Pollution Act to confine work to specific hours. But it recorded several instances over the following 10 days of breaches, both before and after these hours. On one occasion, ISG Pearce asked the council's permission to work past the hours on the weekend of November 19 and 20 and was refused, but conducted noisy work anyway. Local resident Rob Machen, whose family had been frequently disturbed by the noise, said: "It's quite disappointing. I don't think they're being taught a lesson, I don't think it's punitive."