

THE BOTTOM RUNG

Noise: the challenges, trends, technologies, politics and opportunities

Looking forward; seeking solutions

Summer 2020

PEDALLING OUT OF LOCKDOWN



An abiding memory of lockdown will be the way streets were given over to cyclists. And it will continue in some form post-lockdown. All over Europe – and beyond – towns and cities have been installing instant cycle lanes to enable people to move around while the use of public transport is restricted due to social distancing. The big question is whether these new types of streets – more cycle and pedestrian-friendly; quieter, cleaner and safer – will remain in the long-run. It may depend on how long the pop-up facilities are in place but experience tells us that once you give people a taste of freedom – in any sphere of life – it is hard to take it away. These liveable streets are most likely to survive in city centres and in inner-city areas where car-ownership tends to be low, public transport is more available and population densities are often higher. In the suburbs the car may remain more dominant.

Check out our new blogsite - <https://www.cutnoise2day.co.uk/>
- which includes stimulating articles on life after lockdown

Sound lessons from Lockdown

A bit like the virus itself, the noise impact of lockdown hit people in very different ways. For some it was the silence of the streets and the skies – well-described in an excellent article by Jenni Russell, reprinted on pages 3 & 4. For others, it was a nightmare of being cooped up beside noisy neighbours or being driven crazy by a wind turbine or some other piece of machinery from, which there was no escape. What lessons can be learnt? The first, and most obvious, is that many experienced – younger generations for the first time – what it is like to live in a quiet world. The hope is that will move noise up both people's personal agenda and the political agenda. On specifics, there is now a greater chance of less car-dominated streets. The bike not the car

People experienced – some for the first time - what it was like to live in a quieter world

was the king of lockdown. However, there is a huge caveat to that. With public transport struggling because of social distancing many will take to their cars; maybe even buy one for the first time. How 'cars versus bikes' plays out will influence the look and feel of our future streets. Aviation will take years to recover but when it does I suspect the overflowed communities will resist going back to the din of 2019 and fight for fewer planes overhead. More people may notice background music in public places and the loud announcements on public transport. There could be renewed pressure on councils to sort out neighbour noise; and for noise audits to be carried out on all energy sources. But the real test will be whether enough people want the 'new normal' to be quieter.

John Stewart
Editor *The Bottom Rung*

How lockdown was for me

Three officers of the UK Noise Association each experienced lockdown in a very different way...

Rochester Kent

Val Weedon MBE, Founder and Honorary President

Just as I started to write this piece I am literally being driven to distraction by noise! Our neighbours are having work carried out on their home and the scaffolders have arrived, along with their poles and boards they have an industrial type radio that many builders seem to feel is an essential part of their kit. The music is so loud I can hardly think. Thankfully, a quiet word results in an apology and the noise stops and I can continue writing. DIY is just one of the many noises that have increased during the Covid-19 crisis. A small national survey by the BBC Newsbeat team found that 44 out of 51 local authorities which responded to their study reported they had more noise complaints since the lockdown began in March. Music still seems to be top of the list, closely followed by DIY, and not surprisingly noisy children is also included in the list, especially as most of them are now at home during what has been described as 'unusual times'. There has also been an increase in the variety of noise complaints such as bird scarers, cockerels and even squawking parrots! A quick look through Google search with the words "Neighbour Noise Complaints During Lockdown"

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throws up many pages of national and local newspaper stories about the increase in neighbour noise complaints. One of the reports online from my own area in Kent states that: "It is probably unsurprising with everyone essentially is confined to their home or garden, and that has led to an increase in noise complaints over the last few weeks. The majority of them are for things like loud music or everyday domestic noise." Whilst overall many people have benefitted from the removal of some community noise like traffic and aircraft, the losers seem to be in the neighbourhood, setting causing conflict across the garden fence. Some councils have tried to be pro-active in trying to avoid conflict and bad feeling by appealing to residents via their websites asking them to "Be considerate to your neighbours during this time." For many this approach has fallen on deaf ears and those who suffer have no alternative but to make an official complaint, although most of the advice seems to be encouraging them to have a quiet word initially, and if that doesn't work, to keep a diary of the times and duration of the noise. That all sounds awfully familiar to me. That was advice campaigners were critical of back in the 1990's when I first started campaigning!

As the lockdown eases, hopefully so will our stress levels and neighbour noise will return to some normality.

Livingstone, Scotland

Frank McManus, Treasurer

I live in Livingston, West Lothian, not far from Edinburgh. There are no cycle lanes on roads in Livingston. Indeed, there are none in West Lothian. However, there are paths which cyclists can use. As well as the much-welcomed lack of noise, especially from vehicles, one thing has struck me was the recent dramatic use of cycling. Indeed, Livingston has seen a 50% increase in the use of cycling since the lockdown. I was born and bred in Livingston. Until twenty five years ago cycling was not popular. **During the 1960's and 1970's I saw few bicycles on roads around Livingston.** There was a general attitude that cyclists simply should not be on public roads. Indeed, cycling represented an outdated form of transport, and had no place in the modern world. Some motorists openly displayed a dislike for cyclists by sounding their horns if the former were forced to slow down to accommodate the presence of a bike on a road. One hopes that the upsurge in popularity of cycling amongst the population will prompt West Lothian Council to invest more in promoting cycling, by introducing inter alia, cycle paths on roads, and also discouraging the use of cars in the town centre, in particular.'

Livingston has seen a 50% increase in the use of cycling since the lockdown despite having no cycle lanes!

Stockwell, South London, **John Stewart**, Chair

A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square, the famous war-time song. It doesn't quite compare but I was thrilled when for the first time in 40 years I heard birds singing in South Lambeth Road. It is a main traffic artery in Inner London and overflowed by both Heathrow and London City aircraft – sometimes over 40 planes an hour. With City closed, Heathrow operating at 25% of normal and car levels dramatically down, the birds sang - and were heard – in South Lambeth Road.

We can't go back to our old noisy world

This article, one of the best on noise in recent years, generated a lot of interest in the UK when it first appeared in the Times (21/5/20).

by Jenni Russell, a regular columnist on the Times

One of the great compensations of lockdown is hearing less noise, at least of the external, ungovernable kind. One's own children at home, quarrelling or competing, is another matter. At least one can shout back at them. Everywhere people are marvelling at hearing the complexity of birdsong, the peacefulness of streets with so little traffic, the pleasure of walking in parks without aircraft rumbling overhead.

The drop in noise is so marked that it has been picked up by the British Geological Survey as a dramatic fall in ground vibrations. The planet itself is quieter because we are. At the end of last month they reported that the noise generated by our daily lives at 100 measuring stations had dropped by between 20 and 50%.

The falls were greatest near railway stations, airports, big roads and construction sites. A seismometer near King's Cross station in London recorded a 30 per cent fall; even Twickenham is down 25 per cent. The same pattern is being seen across the world. Brussels's noise has fallen by a third, and Germany's car traffic is down by 50 per cent. This is a remarkable, temporary liberation from one of the greatest and least considered sources of stress in our lives.



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the inflicting of a neighbour's party music at midnight

Most of us are battered by noise every day but it is worst for those who live in towns and cities, or who travel to them. The imposition of noise and the level of it has risen sharply over the past 40 years. It is not just more planes, more cars, and more construction, but the rise of amplified sound in almost every private and public space, from the piped music in shops, bars and restaurants to the interminable, ear-splitting, repetitive announcements on buses and trains, the thudding from car radios, boom boxes or a passenger's headphones, the inflicting of a neighbour's party music at midnight on everyone a few hundred metres away.

We feel impotent in the face of this onslaught. Rising noise feels like an unavoidable fact of life, one that we care deeply about but cannot influence. More than a third of people dislike piped music; fewer than a third

like it. This year the organisation Action on Hearing Loss found that 80 per cent had cut short their visits to a pub or restaurant because of noise.

A 2014 survey found that in a typical year more residents complain to their local councils about noise than about any other issue. They are right to care. Noise is not something we should shrug off as an intrusion we must learn to live with or be more tolerant of. It is destructive both for our bodies and for our minds.

Our understanding of the damage it causes is accumulating with every new piece of research. In February Joshua Dean from the University of Chicago found that noise is an undetected

performance killer, undermining the brain's ability to focus. When the same task was given to 128 workmen to perform against different noise levels, a slight increase in noise, of just 10db — the equivalent of a vacuum cleaner rather than a dishwasher — reduced productivity by 5 per cent. The workers were quite unaware of this, as noise affected their cognition rather than their effort.

As Dean points out, there are several significant aspects to this. Companies are always desperate to push up productivity, which in Britain has scarcely risen in a decade. A 5 per cent difference in performance is dramatic. Just for context, British productivity has increased by a miserly 0.3 per cent a year for the past ten years, down from 2 per cent annually in the decade before.

Studies have shown that noise can decrease our productivity at work

The findings have implications for every job performed against high noise. Anyone who must take in multiple sources of information and focus, from a factory foreman to a traffic policeman, will function less well than they should. Our minds may try to accept noise; physiologically, our bodies cannot. It affects our hearts, blood pressure, our chances of stroke.

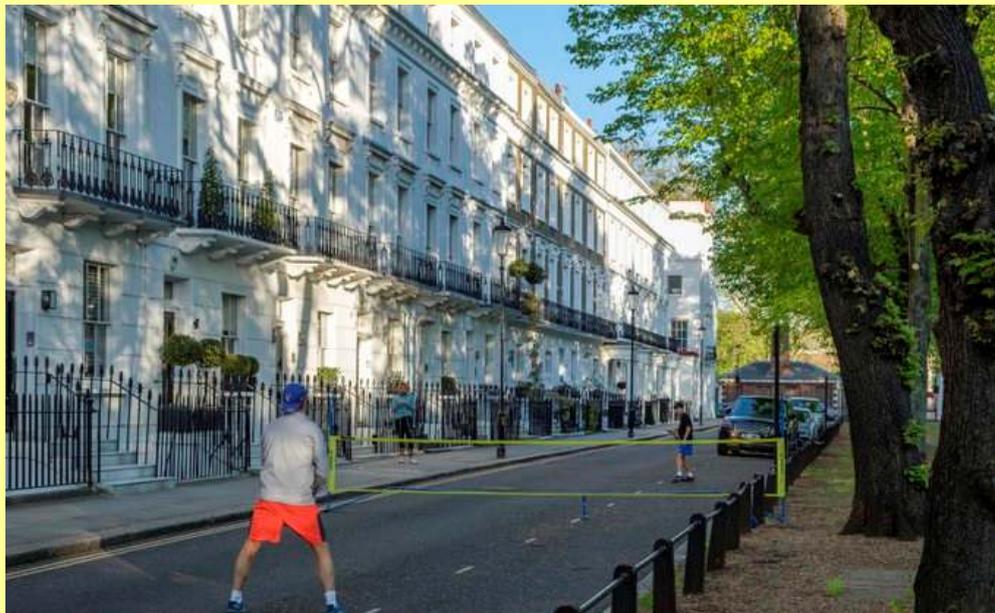
Last autumn the European Heart Journal showed how long-term exposure to traffic and aircraft noise increases heart disease. A five-year study of 500 adults found that for every 5db increase in average noise over 24 hours, there was a 34 per cent increase in heart attacks and strokes. Brain imaging exposed the mechanism. Higher noise levels triggered activity in the amygdala, which processes stress and fear, and increased arterial inflammation. Other studies have shown that even noise we are unaware of, heard during sleep, raises adrenaline and cortisol and disturbs our rest. In America, a 2018 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found higher rates of hypertension and high cholesterol in those exposed to loud noise at work.

Long-term exposure to traffic and aircraft noise increases heart disease

In a German study, people vexed by noise had a higher risk of having their hearts thrown out of rhythm by atrial fibrillation. As a killer and a pollutant, noise has never grabbed public attention in the way climate change and environmental pollution have. Perhaps that's because its effects are, paradoxically, silent and hard to see, except individually, in our racing hearts. The government officially considers noise "an inevitable consequence of a mature and vibrant society".

We all want jobs and prosperity but now that we have glimpsed the effects of greater peace this shouldn't happen just as before.

Let's campaign for more bicycles, quieter road surfaces, lower speeds, fewer planes, minimal announcements, restrictions on the construction hours the government has just, mistakenly, extended. It's what our hearts and minds not only want but cannot flourish without.

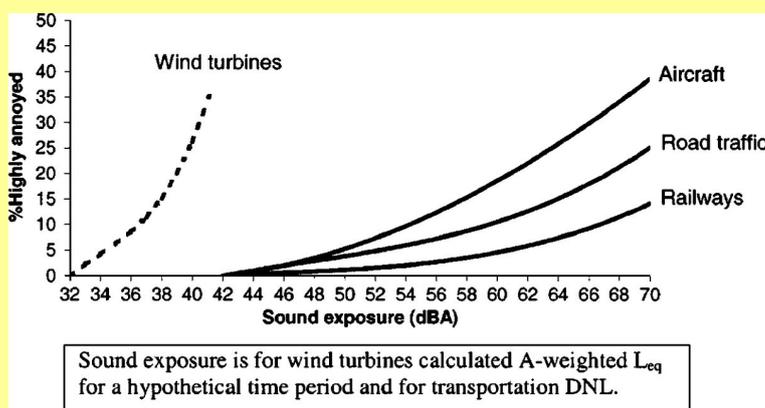


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Prefer to be in 'lockdown' beside a wind turbine or a nuclear power plant?



In noise terms there is no contest. Nuclear power plants do not disturb whereas people start to get highly annoyed by wind turbine noise at lower levels than any other major source of noise. Table from the World Health Organisation.



The wind power industry has reluctantly admitted there may be noise problems and is talking about mitigation measures or offering people money who live beside turbines. And some governments are now insisting that turbines can only be built within so many miles from the nearest residential property. Distance can deal with the noise but not always. Low-frequency noise can travel further and can penetrate buildings. In any noise audit of new energy sources wind turbines would come close to the bottom of the list.

Nuclear – but is it safe?

“Isn't n-n-nuclear too dangerous, too expensive, too creepy? Well, no. It's thousands of times safer than coal, which [kills hundreds of thousands of people](#) each year. Actually, nuclear power is the [safest form of energy](#) ever used, in terms of deaths per unit of energy. Nuclear also generates far less waste than other energy sources, including renewables. The spent fuel from a lifetime of electricity use by an average American generated entirely from nuclear power would fit in a soda can. Someday we'll bury it, but for now the waste can be left safely in its dry casks, certified for a hundred years, while we attend to bigger issues like saving the planet.” From the *Huffington Post* (29/5/20)

Unconvinced? Check out our new blogsite - <https://www.cutnoise2day.co.uk/> - for informative, provocative, stimulating articles on quiet forms of energy.



Listen Out!

- the chance for you to sound off!

Why all noise officers should be over 60 years of age!

Over 60s only need apply! Now, don't get me wrong, I like young people. They are fitter, better looking and more energetic than me. But they shouldn't be noise enforcement officers. They don't 'get' noise. Some of them might but I'm not willing to take the risk. It's a blanket ban! It's a job that should be reserved for us over-60s. How many youngsters really understand that noise can be a torment? Noise they don't even notice or, indeed, can cause. We were privileged to grow up in an era when pubs, shops and cafes didn't play background music....at all; when the rare busker just strummed her guitar; when the streets were for playing on and an aircraft in the sky was as rare as Haleys Comet; when there were no announcements on buses, tubes or trains –

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that's right, none at all; when the pubs shut at 11pm and the night economy was a midnight burger at Wimpys; when we turned on transistors, not sound systems; and when Lulu's Boom-Bang-a-Bang rarely registered a noise complaint. We do realize that world has gone. And most of us have had children who have grown up in a very different world. And we love our grandchildren – particularly when they fix our smart phones and sort out our computers! My point is this. We understand the world they grew up in. There's no reason for them to understand the world we grew up in. And, without that understanding, I'm not sure they really can appreciate how utterly traumatic noise can be. And for those under 60 who do, I apologise. My job can be yours when you reach 60!

Jenny Harkins would never call herself 60 years young!

- *Listen Out!* is an opportunity for people with a strong opinion on a noise matter to have their say. Have your say!

Help! I've got a noise problem!

You can contact:

The Noise Abatement Society

<http://noiseabatementociety.com/>

Helpline on 01273 823 850;

email info@noise-abatement.org

The Noise Abatement Society also carries out a range of activities including research and lobbying

Or contact **Noise Nuisance**

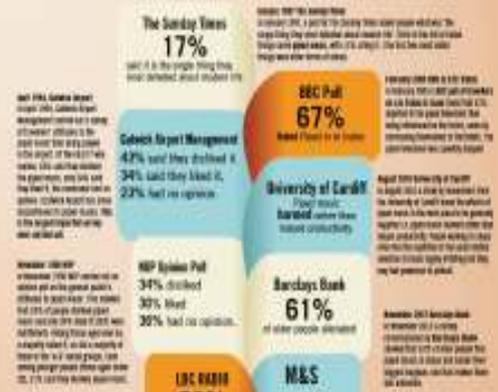
<https://noisenuisance.org/>

PIPED MUSIC THE FACTS

Amid the many claims and counter-claims made about piped music (also called music, raised music or elevator music), objectively researched facts about piped music's effects and its real popularity can be very hard to find. This sheet presents the facts about people's attitudes to piped music and its effects to human health.

MORE PEOPLE HATE PIPED MUSIC THAN LIKE IT

Contrary to what is often believed, objective to piped music outnumber those who like it, as the following survey shows:



To find a great list of venues free of background music check out <https://quietcorners.org.uk/> run by the admirable Pipedown.



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Overheard

"The streets became alive with the sound of bird song and bicycles"
Nigel Rodgers