

THE BOTTOM RUNG

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

Looking forward; seeking solutions

Summer 2021

NOISE COMPLAINTS SOAR DURING LOCKDOWN



Will we be left to live with noise?

With hindsight, it was always perhaps predictable complaints about neighbour noise would increase while we were locked down in our homes. And equally predictable that the increase would be greatest in poorer areas where people tend to live closer together - in flats or houses of multiple occupation. The question is what happens now? Will people continue to be as annoyed by their neighbour's noise? And will the local authorities, short of money, have the resources to tackle the problem? Will they see it as a priority to do so? There is a real danger that noise will not be near the top of their agenda. At a time like this it is worth reminding ourselves that noise is not just a concern for a super-sensitive few.

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11% of people are extremely disturbed by neighbour noise, according to the official National Noise Attitude Survey, with 54% bothered to some extent. And it is estimated that 1 in 6 people move house each year because of noise. Noise doesn't make the international headlines like climate change. The profile of climate change and the subsequent pressure on governments and local authorities to deliver on it led to councils all over the country declaring 'climate emergencies.' The numbers impacted by neighbour noise should require an equally urgent response. Without it, post-pandemic, a lot of people, particularly in poorer areas, will suffer in vain waiting for the resources to be available which would help sort out their noise problem.

John Stewart
Editor *The Bottom Rung*

Noise complaints soared by almost 50% in London during the first wave of the pandemic. Despite overall reductions in decibel levels from transport and construction across the capital, neighbourhood noise drove residents to distraction as they were forced to work from home. Other factors were the need for parents to home-school their children; and the increased stress levels due to concerns about the pandemic. The number of complaints made to councils increased 47.5 per cent compared with the previous year, a University College London study found.

There were 25,740 complaints made between March 27 and May 31, compared with 17,446 in the same period the previous year. Researchers found "neighbourhood noise" — mainly from residents as pubs, clubs and restaurants were closed — sparked most complaints, with "construction noise" second. In general, there was a bigger increase in complaints in poorer areas with higher unemployment rates and lower cost housing.

A longer version of this article appeared in the London Evening Standard on 1st June - [research paper](#).

GROUND TO AIR

We make a prediction. Over the next decade our streets will become quieter but our skies will get noisier.

Quieter Streets

There are a range of measures, likely to be put in place, which will cut traffic noise:

- Electric cars will reduce noise at speeds of under about 35mph. Above that, there will be little difference as tyre noise predominates.
- 20mph speed limits are becoming the norm in many towns and cities. The basic rule of thumb is the lower the speed, the less noise from vehicles.
- More journeys will be done by bicycle and probably on foot as well.
- Cargo bikes will be used a lot more for deliveries.
- Road user charging is likely to be introduced in several cities. That will cut traffic levels, particularly if some of the money raised is put into lowering the fares.



Cargo bikes: an innovation which will cut street noise

These measures will cut noise from traffic in cities and towns. We may see fewer of them in rural areas.

Noisier Skies

There are new developments which could increase noise in the air:

- Conventional aircraft may become a little less noisy but, post the pandemic recovery, this could well be offset by an overall increase in the number of aircraft.
- Flying cars could be taking people to the races at Ascot or a business conference in Brighton.
- Drones might be delivering your neighbour's pizza.
- Helicopters are likely to be still buzzing around.



Drones & flying cars could make our skies much noisier

Innovation is good. It helps drive an economy. But, unchecked, innovations can do damage. The drone is doing wonders delivering goods and medicines in the difficult terrain of Africa or Asia but let Deliveroo delivery your pizza. Crack open the champagne on the train to Ascot. No need to show off by landing in a flying car. You might frighten the horses!

EASA, the European Safety Agency which also assesses the environmental impacts of aviation, is proposing regulations covering drones and flying cars. Much needed. The problem may be that we won't know just how annoying they will be until they are up in the air in significant numbers.

Our editor, John Stewart, tackles the controversial topic of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods:

An unfair solution is no solution

A lot of people, particularly in the richer world, can escape from traffic noise if they can afford to buy a property away from a busy main road. The policy in the UK, and in many other European countries, has been to direct through traffic away from the so-called 'residential' roads on to the 'main' roads. I would suggest that this is deeply inequitable, made more so by the fact that it is the people living on main roads who are less likely to own and drive cars or be able to move away. They are victims of other people's noise.

I wrote those words in 2009 in the book *Why Noise Matters* (published by Earthscan in 2011). And I continued.....

The equitable solution would be to reverse the policy of concentrating traffic on the main roads; to encourage rat-runs; to direct traffic along residential roads once the noise levels on the main roads have exceeded the recommended WHO levels. It is not likely to happen!

My prediction was 100% wrong! I never foresaw that Satnav, home deliveries and increasing car ownership would mean that is exactly what happened. **Until low traffic neighbourhoods came long.**



These two roads are about a mile apart. One is closed to through-traffic; the other very much open to it! LTNs are pleasant: safe to cycle and walk around; quiet, low levels of pollution. Good planning of them can sort out access for disabled people. But, if all this comes at the price of a lot more traffic on other roads, often main roads, the unfairness of it is so stark it doesn't need spelling out. Now I know that all LTNs are not having this sort of dramatic impact on main roads and that main roads will by their nature always be busier. They will carry more through-traffic; they have the hustle and bustle of shops, cafes, churches, mosques, take-aways and pubs – they will have more deliveries; and they are, with very good reason, the principal bus routes. But all that also means the



amount of traffic on main roads doesn't just impact their residents. Most of us spend a lot of time on main roads: at work; at school; shopping and socialising; waiting for buses; meeting friends; simply walking. I also understand the argument that some of the displaced traffic may in due course evaporate. And I appreciate that, if local authorities are offered money to put in LTNs to improve things for a lot of their residents they will do so. But look at those pictures again. That is simply not fair.

LTN-type schemes are not new.....

but this time main road residents are fighting back

Restricting traffic on side streets is not new. It has been happening in a relatively minor way in most British cities for years. It has gone under a number of names: homes zones; traffic-calmed streets; traffic cells. Mostly, it was affluent or relatively affluent areas which benefited. (Some, though not all, the recent low-traffic neighbourhoods have included deprived as well as better-off communities). But what they did have in common was the fact traffic would be shunted on to the main roads. There were isolated examples of measures to cut traffic on main roads, such as Edinburgh reducing cars and lorries on Leith Walk, when the surrounding streets were traffic-calmed but those were the exceptions.

What happened in London is instructive. In the late 1980s Government proposals for a £12bn programme of new and widened highways met with ferocious community opposition (*see picture*). Thousands of homes would have been destroyed; many parks decimated. Over 250 groups from across the capital formed the alliance, ALARM (All-London Against the Road Building Menace) which I chaired. In face of the opposition, the Government dropped its proposals in 1990.

The road building plans were replaced by the red routes. These were intended to speed up traffic on many of London's main roads. The plans, though, were more nuanced than just building fast-moving freeways. They included innovative proposals for many more bus lanes, improved conditions for pedestrians and strategically-placed delivery and parking bays. However it was assumed that through-traffic would use these roads. Indeed, local authorities were encouraged to traffic calm side roads. And, even with the growth in traffic that has taken place on side roads over the last decade, red routes remain the biggest source of noise and pollution.



What is the solution?

Any solution has to be put in the context of the overall growth in traffic. Over the past 25 years, the number of cars in Britain has risen 42.5%. This is the underlying cause of the problems on our roads. I have long believed road user charging is necessary to deal with it. The aim would be to cut traffic on all roads in order to give people a better quality of life and to reduce congestion and thus costs to business.

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In my view at least some of the revenue raised from the road-user charge should help pay for a frequent, accessible, cheap and improved public transport system; the objective being to ensure most people would be spending less on transport than they do today. But road-user charging would not be enough on its own. The cost of parking needs to rise and measures installed on *all* roads to facilitate active travel, enforce low speed limits and cut road danger. What I'm talking about is a level playing field so that some roads are no longer singled out for special treatment at the expense of others. New technology will also help – for example electric cars cut pollution and, at lower speeds, noise. A move towards more freight deliveries by cargo bikes is welcome. If low traffic neighbourhoods have acted as a catalyst to these wider changes, they will have served a purpose.

LOUDER THAN A PLANE LANDING AT HEATHROW



A new study has revealed that platform announcements on London Underground can reach 98 decibels, louder than a plane landing at Heathrow. The study, carried out by the Noise Association, looked at the relevance, volume and frequency of the announcements made on the London Underground network.

The study found:

- On average there is an announcement on London Underground trains every 42 seconds
- On an 18 minute journey on the Victoria Line there was a total of 22 announcements
- On a 24 minute journey on the District Line there was a total of 37 announcements

Key recommendations:

- 1. The frequency of announcements is reduced.** This is very feasible as many of them are repeated far too frequently – sometimes the same announcement is repeated within a minute. It is also hard to argue that all the announcements are essential.
- 2. Move away from information overload.** Many passengers just switch off. Concentrate on providing clear basic information; and sound advice when there is a problem.
- 3. The loudness of the typical announcement is cut.** Platform announcements of 90 decibels and more serve no purpose other than to startle, annoy and, over time, damage hearing.
- 4. The announcements become much more concise.** Single words often hit home better than fully-fledged sentences.

We had a constructive meeting with London Underground who recognized that its announcements needed looking at.

The full study: http://www.ukna.org.uk/uploads/4/1/4/5/41458009/underground_announcements.pdf

In an unrelated development Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has promised “There will be fewer annoying and repetitious recorded announcements” on overground trains. Welcoming the announcement, Anthony Smith, CEO of independent watchdog Passenger Focus said people wrote complaining of “Just pure noise pollution”.

JUMBO NOISE PROBLEM

Africa's Elephants Hate Thumping Droning Wind Turbine Noise



Thumping, grinding wind turbine noise has always been the elephant in the room for the wind industry. Now, it's the elephants themselves who've signalled just how annoying low-frequency wind turbine noise is. Renowned for their acutely sensitive hearing in the lower frequency register, the long-distance communication between Africa's elephants is being drowned out by an increasing number of wind turbines being erected across the African savanna.

Elephants are perhaps the best known of the animals which communicate at very low-frequencies. They largely use infrasound, the lowest of frequencies. They will stamp on the ground and send seismic waves which other elephants can pick up because the soles of their feet have passing corpuscles which act like ground-listening antennae or receptors. Using infrasound, elephants can communicate over distances of 40 kilometres. There is evidence to show that when an elephant is shot in one area, elephant herds 30 to 40 kilometres away become distressed.

New research from South Africa shows the impact of wind turbines on elephants. To listen to an 8 minute interview with the researcher, tune into <https://omny.fm/shows/afternoons-with-pippa-hudson/on-the-couch-acoustic-engineer-sounds-the-alarm-ov>

For more information on the wider topic:

<https://stophesethings.com/2021/06/04/jumbo-noise-problem-africas-elephants-hate-thumping-droning-wind-turbine-noise/>

And from Scotland:

"Local authorities are increasingly concerned about how noise from wind farms may be controlled or noise complaints investigated when there are several neighbouring wind farms with different operators and separate planning consents. Local planning authority would prefer cumulative noise conditions but such conditions have been set only in a few cases across the UK."

Listen Out!

Our regular slot that gives you the chance to sound off!

'I wish I had said something'

I suspect we have all been there. We want to say something but we don't. Does the following sound familiar to you? I'm enjoying a summer's day in the park. People around me are chatting, sunbathing, picnicking or playing Frisbee. And then from a small group, the ghetto blaster starts. The noise fills the park. I want to tell them they are selfish, inconsiderate, arrogant in thinking everybody else is enjoying their music. But I don't. I shake with sadness and annoyance but keep my thoughts to myself and leave the park early. Or the video playing on the mobile phone on the bus. I stride up and challenge the group? Never!

I am mostly silent, far too silent, about the noise which invades our public space

I am mostly silent, far too silent, about the noise which invades our public space. Is it because I feel I will be on my own? That others won't back me up? That some of the public might actually be enjoying the noise? That thought struck me forcibly when a band playing loud rock music outside a bookshop – yes a bookshop! – attracted a crowd of admirers. And the band was not breaking any laws. They were in a spot designated for music by the local authority. And perhaps that's the nub of the problem. Local councils are willing to provide street space for people to play music but how many of them would be willing to designate their parks 'no music' zones? Isn't that sending the wrong signal to those that pollute our public spaces with unwanted music? If I was still a smoker and I lit up in a town hall, I would soon be stopped. Yet the very same councils give a nod to passive noise. I feel I'm on my own. That's why I don't speak up.

by a Silent Sufferer

Two Great Videos

Cities Are Not Loud: Cars Are Loud

from Notjustbikes

<https://youtu.be/CTV-wwszGw8>

How Noise Pollution is Ruining Your Life

from Niklas Christl

https://youtu.be/kFh_OdMb5v8

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/>



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