

Ambient Noise Strategy: A Solution for Noise Control?

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The British Government earlier this year undertook a consultation on its proposal, announced in the Rural White Paper, to develop an Ambient Noise Strategy in England.

The proposals envisage a three phase approach:

In phase 1 we would aim to establish three key sets of information:

- **information on the ambient noise climate in the country - i.e. the number of people affected by different levels of noise, the source of that noise (road, rail, airports and industry) and the location of the people affected, by producing noise maps of the main sources of noise;**
- **methods which the Government might use to assess the effects of noise - particularly regarding people's quality of life and tranquillity;**
- **the techniques available to take action to improve the situation where bad or preserve it where good.**

In phase 2 we would aim to evaluate and identify options for prioritising the various alternatives from phase 1 in terms not only of costs and benefits but also time-scales and synergies and conflicts with other Government priorities including economic and social issues. An optimal policy reduces noise at lowest net cost, whilst capturing as many synergistic benefits, and minimising any potentially adverse impacts. Decision makers need to ensure that the impacts of the noise policies do not cost society more than the benefits expected. A recent study undertaken by the Government, looked at how a cost-benefit type framework could be used, with noise maps, to help inform such decisions.

Finally, in phase 3, the Government would need to agree on the necessary policies to move towards the desired outcome - i.e. the National Ambient Noise Strategy itself. The results of the consultation are expected to be published later this year.

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Introduction

The Government earlier this year undertook a consultation on its proposal, announced in the Rural White Paper to develop an Ambient Noise Strategy in England.

The proposals envisage a three phase approach, to:

- 1. establish: information on the ambient noise climate in the country; methods which the Government might use to assess the effects of noise; the techniques available to take action to improve the situation where bad or preserve it where good.**

- 2. evaluate and identify options for prioritising the various alternatives; and**

- 3. agree on the necessary policies to move towards the desired outcome – i.e. the National Ambient Noise Strategy itself.**

The results of the consultation are expected to be published later this year.

Phase 1

Action to reduce, abate and mitigate environmental noise is very much a live issue.

For noise from roads, action includes:

VEHICLES

- type approval noise requirements for new vehicles;
- roadworthiness inspections and exhaust checks in MOT
- tyre noise standards;
- controls on lorry rattle and ancillary equipment noise;
- new technology such as common rail diesel and hybrid and fuel cell power.

ROADS

- action on existing road hot-spots;
- quiet road surfaces in the 10 year transport plan

For noise from railways, action includes:

- an enhanced programme of rail-grinding;
- inter-operability agreements across Europe

AVIATION

- phase out of Chapter 2;
 - departure noise limits;
 - departure noise preferential routes;
 - night restrictions
- etc.

INDUSTRY

- planning;
 - statutory nuisance;
 - IPPC;
- etc.

However, if yet further action is to be introduced, it will be necessary to ensure that an effective evidence base is developed to underpin the arguments for such action (and resources to carry it through) in the context of competing demands for scarce public resources.

Phase 1 of the development of the strategy is, therefore, very much a data and information gathering exercise. To move towards further action for noise control we must gather:

- information on the ambient noise climate in the country. In simple terms, the number of people affected by different levels of noise, the source of that noise (road, rail, airports and industry) and the location of the people affected. This will be undertaken by producing noise maps of the

main sources of noise – a major new exercise for which we have put aside £13m;

- methods which the Government might use to assess the effects of noise – particularly regarding people's quality of life. Special consideration will also be needed in regard to tranquillity;

- the techniques available to take action to improve the situation where bad or preserve it where good.

Phase 2

We must then evaluate and identify options for prioritising the various alternatives identified in phase 1 in terms not only of costs and benefits but also in terms of time-scales and synergies and conflicts with other Government priorities (not only environmental but also, for example, economic and social issues).

It is important to balance the costs of reducing noise exposure (building barriers, double glazing, traffic calming measures etc) with the benefits. There might also be wider impacts - some positive, some negative for society - including changes in air quality, greenhouse gases and safety.

An optimal policy reduces noise at lowest net cost, whilst capturing as many synergistic benefits, and minimising any potentially adverse impacts. This means that resources could be used elsewhere to societies' benefit, and potential conflicts with other policy areas - air quality, health etc are kept to minimum avoiding undoing the work of other strategies.

Decision makers need to ensure that the impacts of the noise policies do not cost society more than the benefits expected. A recent study undertaken by the Government, looked at how a cost-benefit type framework could be used, with noise maps, to help inform such decisions.

Phase 3

We would then be well placed to argue for Central and Local Government to agree on the necessary policies to move towards the desired

outcome - i.e. the National Ambient Noise Strategy itself.

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