

Councils spring to action

Extract from
Noise Bulletin
Magazine

Lis Stedman finds out whether budget cuts have dampened the ardour of local authorities and other organisations taking part in Noise Action Week

Noise Action Week this year was a decided success, the Epuk-organised event had support from MPs, with Twitter and other online social networking tools being used to spread the message to a wider audience than ever.

This year's topics included noise and schools – the importance of a healthy noise environment for children and teachers, in acknowledgement of the Institute of Acoustics campaign, and there was certainly plenty of school-based activity, of which more anon – and noise in gardens and open spaces. Housing associations came forward in numbers to help, in addition to the traditional support from councils.

The impression gained is that this year the level of activity stepped up a gear. Mary Stevens confirms: "There was a lot going on round the country – a lot emerged through Twitter and Google searches." Epuk contacted MPs to ask for support and a healthy number of all political hues issued press releases with a greater number pledging their support.

For instance, the Tory MP for Meriden, Caroline Spelman, issued a press release noting: "Having served as an MP for fourteen years, I know that excessive noise creates misery for many people. Complaints to me and to local councillors have frequently focused on loudness, which often accompanies anti-social behaviour."

Other MPs issuing statements of support included Lib-Dem MP for Leeds North West Greg Mulholland, who said on his website: "I welcome Noise Action Week and am confident that it will raise awareness of noise related problems, and the solutions to this. Excessive noise is a real issue that can be incredibly stressful for people, whether it be at home, work or travelling."

Labour MP for Blaydon David Anderson said provocatively on his web page: "Such initiatives are handy but we need less noise pollution every day. [Epuk's] advice all boils down to being considerate to each other and treating others as we would like to be treated ourselves." Other high-profile backers included Labour's Keith Vaz, Tory Dr Liam Fox, and Labour's David Lammy – Epuk has so far recorded 13 MPs issuing press releases and over 30 MPs and MSPs voicing support.

Actions from the other high-profile supporters of NAW included HACAN, with an entertaining quiz that posed five questions about aircraft noise (aficionados can test their expertise) on its website.

These were:

- Hounslow and Richmond are the most overflowed boroughs in London, but which borough is in third place?
- How many people in London are disturbed by aircraft noise?
- How many local people from Newham does London City Airport employ?
- To which sporting event to be held in August in London would it be advisable to bring ear-plugs?
- Name at least one "oasis" in London; an area that is typically plane-free?

The answer to the first, surprisingly, is Waltham Forest. Hacan chair John Stewart said: "We did a survey over nine months – we were getting a lot of complaints from East London and wondered what that was about so we calculated the number of planes over each borough. Waltham Forest was high because it has got a lot of Heathrow and London City planes – the London City aircraft are at less than 3000ft and part of the borough is getting a lot of Heathrow planes as they are turning."

“Decibella, the put a sock in it hand puppet”

He notes that it shows aircraft noise is no longer confined to parts of west London. "You can virtually find aircraft noise in any part of London, which wasn't the case 15 years ago." Another surprise is that London City Airport employs just 300 residents of Newham, less than a large Tesco.

Stewart says: "What benefit is London City bringing to the local borough? Over 60% of those using the airport are business people, the highest proportion in the UK. They are landing and speeding out in a cab as quickly as possible." The locals experience the disbenefits such as air pollution, he observes, but very little in the way of benefits. People were surprised by the answers to the quiz, he adds (the remainder are at the bottom of this feature).

New faces on the NAW scene included housing association Guinness South which hit the road with a staff member dressed as a dog (a favourite Noise Action Week disguise)

and agencies such as environmental health and mediation specialists to talk to residents on their estates about the impact noise can have and how it can be prevented.

As well as providing literature and discussing the different aspects of noise, there were various activities on board, including a drawing competition for children, an opportunity for people to test their hearing against a sound monitor and the chance to meet Justin the life-sized dog.

Mike Parkin, of the Guinness South team says: "We have a converted motorhome that we take out to various events, where people can come on board and talk about their issues." The event covered estates in Brighton, Milton Keynes, Hemel Hempstead and London.

Parkin says: "The roadshow raised awareness about noise and how important it is, as well as how to avoid getting into trouble." On the rainier days, the team went out knocking on doors to spread the message, and the dog proved a big draw with schoolchildren. "They dragged their parents in with them," Parkin chuckles. "It worked on a lot of levels."

The noise meter also proved a revelation to people he adds. Visitors were asked to turn a stereo to what they thought was an acceptable level, which was then recorded on the noise meter. "People were genuinely interested," he says, adding: "The general feeling is that if people realised they were causing distress and upset they were genuinely embarrassed."

He was also pleased that a young man who had had a noise complaint lodged

● continued overleaf



Melin Homes had its Community Safety Team (Helen Larkin and Steven Mitchell) at an information stall in Cwmbran Town Centre.

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against him previously came to the bus to explain what he had done to reduce noise levels in his home. "He had gone from being an inadvertent nuisance to really picking up the mantle and taking responsibility," Parkin observes. "In my experience in the work we have done noise nuisance often is inadvertent – that is why it felt so worthwhile to be proactive."

Among a number of authorities focusing on one of the main themes, schools, was South Kesteven DC. Spokesperson Rowena Long says the team visited three local junior schools and held training sessions. "It was good fun," she says. "They got quite involved." The team has a giant plastic ear that is used to explain the workings of that complex organ, and at each school there was a discussion and competition based around noise and annoyance. "We asked the children what they thought of different noises – some children found some annoying and others did not."

Fife Council held noise and health workshops in schools, among a range of other activities. Consumer Education Team EHO Tom Weanie says: "We did some work with primary schools – they are the noise makers of the future. We explained how noise and the ear work, and had a noise meter to demonstrate both a lot of noise and quiet. We went outside to explain background noise and had an Epuk poster blown up to A1 size, on which the children had to find the noise." The visits proved very popular, he reports, and the team now has many more booked up.

The council had a wide range of other NAW activities, Weanie notes: "We decided one of our focuses was going to be alarm noise – we have not had a lot of people registering as keyholders." The event was widely publicised and proved a great success, he says: "We had an amazing response – on the first day we had 15 to 20 people register." The team also went to local colleges to draw attention to the issue of hearing loss from too-loud personal music players.

He adds that the council's NAW activities (and the team that undertakes the week's work) are evolving to include such people as the dog warden, the night noise team, and representatives from the licensed trade office. "It is just a much better team and better organised – much better than three years ago when we started."

Another affordable housing provider, Derwent and Solway, held a colouring competition with local junior schools to depict nuisance noises, providing materials and prizes, and Swale BC coordinated a sponsored silence at 56 local primary schools. Robert Porter, director of Derwent and Solway, said: "The top rated case types



Elmbridge hit the High Street mob handed

of anti-social behaviour for Derwent and Solway are related to noise. By working with the children we hope to raise awareness about nuisance noise, demonstrating examples of what causes it and why it is a problem."

South East Wales affordable homes provider Melin Homes went out and about on estate visits, as spokesperson Gwen Powell explains: "It went very well, we were quite pleased with the response – we did a couple of estate visits and chatted to residents to see if they had noise problems."

The team also had a stall with Torfaen council in Cwmbran town centre where they expanded on an online noise survey to find what noise locals found most annoying. "It turned out dogs were the biggest culprit at 53%," Powell explains. "Torfaen Council focused its stall on dog barking because it is their big issue."

Torfaen CBC took the opportunity provided by the stall to hold a "pin the shhh on Mr Noisy" game based on "pin the tail on the donkey" for children, and a "can you guess which noise is loudest" game for older visitors. Torfaen also couldn't resist dressing a member of its team up as a Dalmatian dog to hand out balloons to children.

Powell also found that social networking sites were extremely useful in planning the week's events. "Something I found particularly useful when planning the week – our survey was picked up on Twitter, and I think that helped to raise the profile of the event. Melin was very keen to get involved."

Local authority website winner Elmbridge took the opportunity to publicise the revamping of its website and the creation of an online complaint toolkit (rivals please note, this has a prominent spot on the council's home page).

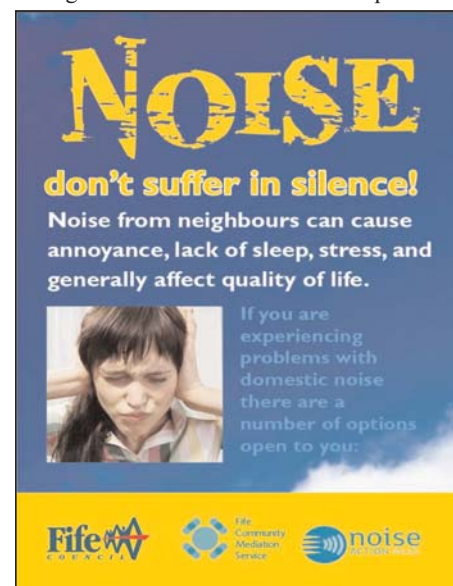
Senior EHO Paul Leadbeater explains: "The online toolkit gives the ability to upload evidence. It also offers template letters including ones for businesses, and you can upload audio clips, nuisance record sheets and witness statements."

The section on the website (which looks increasingly good) about taking private legal action has been rewritten in consultation with the courts, which are now aware of the council's procedures, he adds. The toolkit was developed because the council lost its out of hours service at the beginning of April, he explains, and Noise Action Week was "a real opportunity to get out there and explain the new service to the public".

The council's roadshows were a great success, Leadbeater says, with over 300 visitors and 100 registering their details to go on the mailing list for further information. "Overall it was very positive," he notes. "A lot of people were not aware of the new facilities." The team even loaned iPads to demonstrate the new website to the public, and managed to get information onto the local police intranet so that the constabulary is aware of the team's capabilities.

He believes the ability to upload sound and video clips and other evidence "empowers people suffering from noise, that they can do that and they don't feel as bad or as alone".

Edinburgh CC (like Welsh capital Cardiff) focused on alarm keyholder registration, manager Steve Williamson explains: "We focused on alarms because we get a reasonable amount of complaints



Fife had a series of eye-catching posters



South Kesteven's visit to Caythorpe School

about them.” The number of alarms is on the increase, he adds, and people often forget to provide details of keyholders.

“As with any noise we have to establish a nuisance, which is time consuming, and to demonstrate that we have gone through the necessary process, which is also time consuming,” he says. The team sent out information to all the local media and produced a business-size card with the slogan “don’t alarm your neighbours” to publicise the keyholder registration drive.

Beside the disturbance to neighbours, the team emphasised the costs of a faulty alarm – which can include the council’s not inconsiderable costs for resolving the issue. Williamson says. “If the council has to seek a warrant of entry, the vast number of times it is late at night because that is when we can prove disturbance, and we need a justice of the peace for that, which is not easy in the middle of the night.”

The team also visited streets with predominantly commercial premises, going to those that had alarms and providing information about keyholder registration. “it was received quite positively,” Williamson notes.

He too believes that NAW is growing, though he observes with regret that it has become more difficult to undertake work with schools in the area: “The curriculum is so full, teachers do not have the time for ad-hoc things. Once upon a time schools were delighted to take part.”

A brief rundown of other activities has to mention Medway Council, which held a

five day roadshow based on dog ownership and being a responsible dog owner, with free microchipping, vet checks and agility lessons.

Strabane DC in Northern Ireland also homed in on dogs, with tips on dog care and reducing barking and a competition with a hamper of dog goodies as a prize. Strabane’s Geraldine Kirk said the council often focuses its NAW activities on dogs because it is their top

complaint (dog barking is the regular number one dislike in polls in the province). Kirk added: “The events were about raising awareness – anything that can be done, it all helps.”

The event took place over two days in three towns in the Strabane area and various organisations such as the PDSA NI, dog warden and kennel owners were on hand to give advice on how to keep dogs healthy and content (and therefore quiet).

Hull CC was one of a number of councils (others included Runnymede BC) focusing on student noise, hearing protection and tinnitus awareness, working with Hull University to target students leaving nightclubs and hosting a “design a sign” competition for further education art students – the winning design was made into a real sign that was delivered to chosen licensed premises on the last day of the event to help reduce nuisance noise from pubs and clubs.

Noise measurement instrument manufacturer Cirrus Research urged companies and workers to be extra vigilant when managing noise at work and issued a press release highlighting the risks of work-related hearing loss, and City of York council added new advice to its website on “the growing problem of noise from chickens and cockerels” and also published advice on noise from pubs and clubs.

The Hearing Care Centre in Ipswich sent out a mobile unit to give free hearing checks and educate people on listening to music safely, and Sandwell Homes and

Sandwell police had a stand in a local shopping centre to give advice and urge residents to “keep a lid” on intrusive noise.

Tonbridge and Malling BC worked with Russell Homes on neighbourhood noise and barking dogs, and held a health and wellbeing day featuring “Decibella, the put a sock in it hand puppet”.

Gravesham BC had a stall with a hearing loss simulator and invited people to test their mp3 players and headphones in a “giant ear” to see how loud they were, and Swindon BC trundled out an antique steam roller to crush confiscated noise-making equipment in style.

London councils as always had a wide range of activities, focusing on potential hearing damage from mp3 players and promoting the RNID’s “Don’t lose the music” campaign. LB Harrow hosted a talk by Siobhan Wall on her recently published book *Quiet London*, which some wags would doubtless observe should be a slim volume.

In Scotland, Transport Scotland used the variable messaging signs on the M8 around Glasgow to display messages about environmental noise – they have also surveyed the public about their understanding of traffic noise, results of which should be published soon.

There was also a lively exchange on Epuk’s Twitter page about the relative acoustic merits of plants and stuffed toys, and many other interesting snippets including Specsavers’ request for input on irritating noises people would like to block out, tips on activities around the country including a link to Chelmsford BC’s BBQuiet campaign, and a link to noise puzzles posted by East Staffs BC.

It’s heartening to report that thanks to a combination of growing awareness, goodwill, increasing enthusiasm and the advent of social networking sites to raise the profile of events, despite the absence of central funding Noise Action Week seems to have reached the enviable stage where it has an impetus of its own – as it undoubtedly deserves.

● More details on the NAW website www.noiseactionweek.org.uk



This year much use was made of Twitter to broadcast activities

QUIZ ANSWERS

1. Waltham Forest
2. BAA's Noise Action Plan says over 700,000 but other studies put it closer to 1 million.
3. Just over 300, fewer than a large Tesco's.
4. The Fourth Test between England and India at the Oval, where there can be over 40 planes an hour.
5. There aren't many but you would be right if you came up with places like Uxbridge, Raynes Park, Norbiton, South Woodford, Mayfair, the northern part of Chiswick, most of West Drayton, parts of Kingston, and parts of Barking.