THE BOTTOM RUNG

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

Looking forward; seeking solutions

Winter 2026

ONLY TWO PEOPLE WORK ON NOISE AT DEFRA – PART TIME

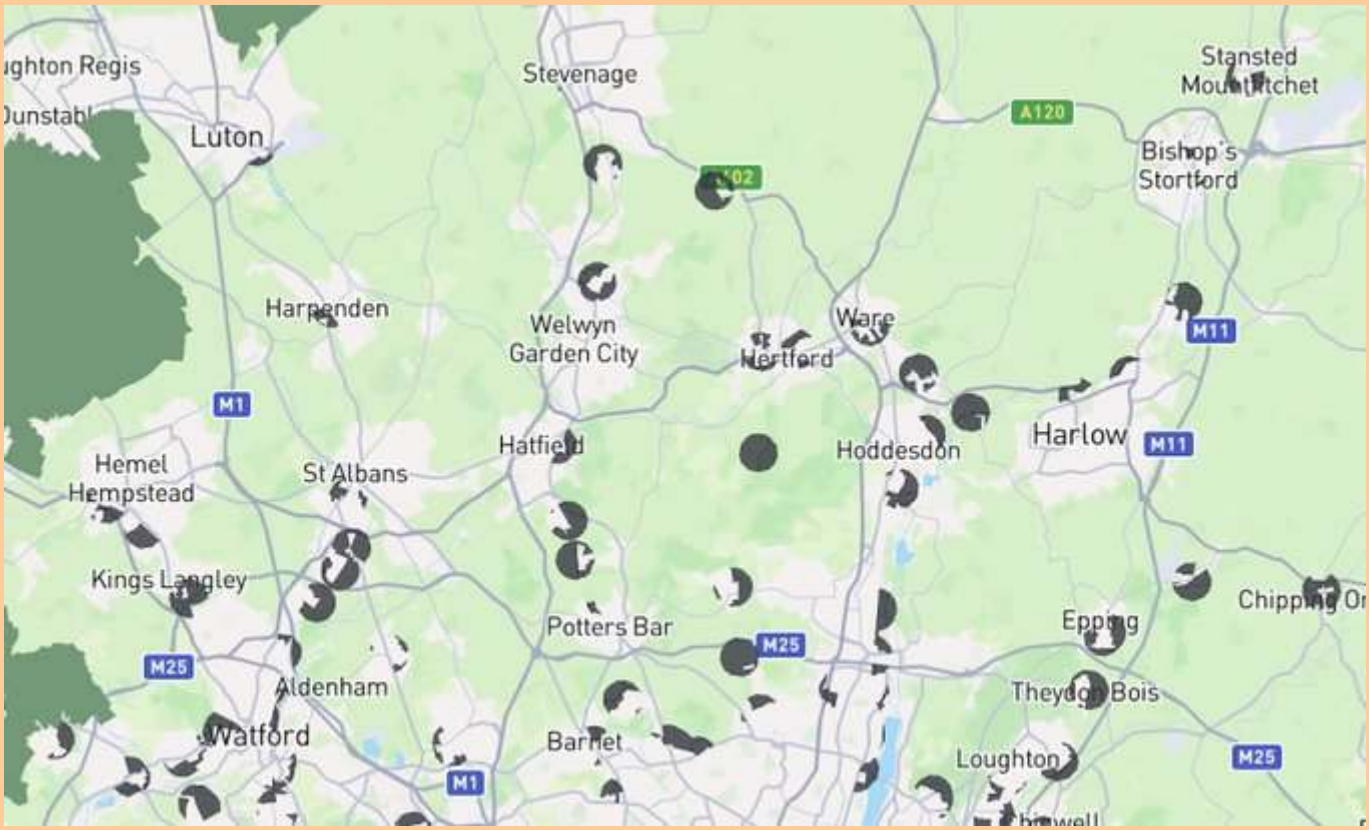
More people are employed in a small branch of Café Nero

Only two people work on noise at DEFRA, the Government department with overall responsibility for noise policy. And neither of them is full-time. In answer to a Freedom of Information request by the UK Noise Association, DEFRA said:

'The current number of full-time equivalent staff employed by Defra working on noise, light and statutory nuisance policy is 0.7. This is one person working part-time. The current number of full-time equivalent staff employed by Defra working on noise, light and statutory nuisance evidence and technical issues is 0.8. This is one person working part-time'.

This is down from half a dozen just a year ago. There are civil servants working on noise matters in other Government departments but low number at DEFRA is yet another indication of the low-priority this Government gives to noise.

GOVERNMENT CONSULTS ON RAIL-BASED NEW HOUSING



As part of a major consultation to speed up the building of much-needed housing the Government has proposed that homes within walking distance of train stations that are well-connected to jobs will be allowed so long as they have a minimum density of 50 homes per hectare. Rail-based development rather than car-based is welcome as it will cut noise. It needs stressing, though, that the proposal is not to build homes at stations. That could cause noise problems.

But in the high-density developments proposed, noise issues must be factored in from the start to avoid problems later. That was the recommendation of the 2023 report by the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee into noise and light pollution: *Information on how to reduce noise pollution must be made available at the planning stage for infrastructure projects, as intervention at source is generally more effective.* It is also a key plank of the Welsh Noise Plan, published in 2023. And it is a guiding principle of Noise Network Plus, the £1.8 million initiative to engineer a quieter future which brings together engineers, policymakers, lobbyists, industry stakeholders and social scientists, launched this month. Professor Mark Plumbley, who is heading up the team, said “Once noise is out there, it is really hard to remove. We need to re-think how we design noise from the start”.

It would appear that this is not the case with one of the consultation’s key proposals. It says that only severe and moderate impacts need to be considered and not lesser noise impacts. Yet that is the noise which affects the vast majority of people.

Factoring in noise from the start would speed up projects. Failure to do so will result in challenges and delays. But, more fundamentally, if noise is factored in at the beginning it can influence which policy is adopted, which design is chosen and what kind of project is promoted.

https://www.gov.uk/government/news/housebuilding-around-train-stations-will-be-given-default-yes

‘BUT NOBODY IN THE ROOM THINKING ABOUT SOUND’

by Kenya Williams

The cities we're building right now are designing the soundscapes we'll live in for the next hundred years.

Think about that.

Every highway we widen. Every building we approve. Every plaza we pave. Every tree we plant or cut down.

These decisions are acoustic decisions.

But nobody's in the room thinking about sound.

We have urban designers considering sight lines and pedestrian flow.

We have engineers calculating traffic capacity and structural loads.

We have environmental planners measuring air quality and stormwater runoff.

But who's asking: what will this sound like in ten years? In fifty?

Who's mapping the sonic future we're locking in?

Right now, we're making permanent decisions about temporary problems.

We're building infrastructure for cars we say we want fewer of.

We're designing density without designing for the acoustic reality of density.

We're creating public spaces and hoping they'll feel public, without considering whether the soundscape invites people to stay or tells them to leave.

Sound isn't cosmetic. It's structural.

It shapes health outcomes. It determines who lives where. It signals belonging or exclusion.

And we're deciding all of it, right now, without a plan.

Here's what I know after 25 years of this work:

The cities that thrive in the next century won't just look different.

They'll sound different.

Because they'll be designed for people who listen.

Not people who endure noise.
Not people who buy their way out of bad soundscapes.
But people who expect the acoustic environment to be designed as intentionally as the visual one.

We have the tools. We have the research. We have the methods.

What we don't have yet is the will to make sound matter.

But we could.

And I think we will.

Because once you start hearing cities differently, you can't go back.

The question is: are we ready to design for what we hear?

Or do we keep building based on what we see and hope the rest works out?

2026 could be the year we decide.

If you only read one report on the impact on noise, read this one. It is short, clear and with superb use of graphics: *No quiet at home: The reality of living with Singapore's traffic noise.* The interactive story shows what constant traffic noise really feels like at home, at night, and over time, and why it matters for health. Plus coverage of the impact of other noise sources.
https://straitstimes.com/multimedia/graphics/2025/12/singapore-traffic-noise/index.html?shell

THEY ASKED RESIDENTS WHAT THEY WANTED FROM NEW FLIGHT PATHS

Airspace is changing. The UK is in line for the biggest changes to flight paths in more than half a century. It is happening across the world as air traffic control moves to a satellite system to guide planes. It will result in narrower, more direct flights. This will save on fuel, cut emissions per plane and probably permit an increase in flight numbers. But what will it do for noise? Flights could all be concentrated over a small number of communities or they could be alternated, affecting more people in total, but giving breaks from the noise.

A ground-breaking study set out to see what residents felt. The research, sponsored by Gatwick, was carried out by Anderson Acoustics and Manchester Metropolitan University. They explored with residents what fairness meant in airspace change - from the way noise is measured, to how decisions are made, to whether communities feel genuinely heard and what their view of fair flight paths looked like. On the thorny question of whether new areas should be affected in order to give those currently overflown some respite, most people felt that ideally new areas should not be overflown but they liked the idea of respite, preferring solutions which shared the planes amongst those already overflown.

In the words of the researchers:

Our research showed that fairness is not a single outcome. It's a process – built on transparency, participation and trust..

What we've learnt

Distributional fainess matters - reminds us that noise impacts are not shared equally. Modernisation should aim to balance benefits and burdens so that no community consistently bears the greatest cost.

Procedural fairness builds legitimacy - people must be part of the process, not outside it.

Informational fairness enables understanding - communities need clear, relatable data.

Tools such as **N65** and the Persons Events Index (combining noise and population data) help translate complex acoustics into something people can actually feel. Paired with community engagement through virtual airports, these approaches reveal not only who is affected but how they perceive fairness itself.

Looking Ahead: Modernisation and Expansion
As the UK moves forward with airspace modernisation and Gatwick's new runway plans, fairness can't be an afterthought.

Technical optimisation alone will not deliver less socially unacceptable outcomes. Decision-making must integrate social evidence alongside operational efficiency - recognising that how a decision is made is often as important as what decision is made.
Environmental justice frameworks remind us that procedural and informational fairness are essential. Meaningful engagement, transparency about trade-offs, and accessible information are not optional extras - they are the foundation of trust.

The full study: https://www.gatwickairport.com/on/demandware.static/-/Sites-Gatwick-Library/en_GB/v1731385947110/images/Corporate-PDFs/Noise%20&%20Airspace/Engagement/NMB%203/FED-FINAL-REPORT-7.pdf

Consultation is expected on the new flight paths in late 2026/early 2027

HEATHROW 3RD RUNWAY AND RESPITE

It is inevitable that the latest attempt to get permission to build a third runway at Heathrow will dominate the headlines. It is a huge project. Public consultation is expected this Summer. That will be followed by a Public Inquiry. The Government would like to give the third runway permission by 2029, with a view to it opening in 2035.

But equally important as far as noise over communities is concerned are the flight path changes that will take place over London and the South East. As a result of any 3rd Runway. The more flight paths an airport has, the greater the opportunity for respite. (It is impossible to vary the flight path on the final approach to a single runway airport though approaches can be varied further out). And this is where the connection to a third runway comes in. It gives the airport the capacity to provide more respite. This is not an argument for the third runway but a plea that, if it does go-ahead, Heathrow renews its commitment to guarantee everybody overflown a period of respite made in 2019 before Covid scuppered its last attempt to get a third runway.

There would need to be a two-stage process as new flight paths will be in place at all airports in the South East, including at a two-runway Heathrow, long before any third runway becomes operational. It makes things messy. But respite is a prize worth striving for: for the first time communities in and around London would be free from all-day flying.

HOW CHINA MADE CITIES LESS NOISY

This article by Eleanor Lcottfirst appeared in the Financial Times 24th November 2025

A few months after moving to Beijing, I realised something unexpected — I was sleeping better than I had in years. This was a surprising revelation in what can politely be termed a "challenging" urban environment.

In the various cities I have lived in, I have grown accustomed to my slumber being pierced by the early morning rumbling of a petrol or diesel vehicle. In London, my cobbled street was haunted by the growl and beeping of rubbish trucks reversing into the lane. In Taipei, rusty repair vans would rattle down the alleys, blaring adverts for menial household tasks. In Hong Kong, trucks dumped deliveries of dried fish at a nearby market.

Beijing was different. It wasn't just my high-rise apartment in a residential neighbourhood. The overall noise from streets across the capital and in many other Chinese cities I visit seems to be growing dramatically quieter since my first visit as an adult in 2016.

The biggest change in the intervening decade is the rise of electric vehicles — the quiet cousin of internal combustion engines. EVs produce lower levels of noise when driving at the low traffic speeds dictated by cities. The noise advantage disappears as they speed up, since the sound of the tyre starts to drown out the engine above 50km per hour. Research suggests EV drivers also tend to accelerate and brake more smoothly, a difference psychologists attribute to the calmer atmosphere of a quieter cabin. That prompted a thought: could China, home to the highest number of EVs in the world, be offering a glimpse of a future where noise pollution is finally being addressed? And if so, could this newfound peace bring real gains: higher productivity and improved health that result from a better night's sleep?

China's environment ministry produces an annual report on noise pollution that provides some answers. The latest edition, published earlier this month, shows a steady improvement. In 2024, the

daily compliance rate for all noise pollution, which includes noise from residential areas, industry and transportation links, was 95.8 per cent during the day and 88.2 per cent at night.

For noise pollution specifically on roads, the compliance rate has increased from 92.6 per cent in 2016 to 99.4 per cent during the day, and from 50.5 per cent to 76.3 per cent at night. While EVs are not the sole reason, it seems unlikely that this is a coincidence. Among major cities, Shenzhen and Shanghai record the highest compliance rates and boast the highest levels of EV penetration.

Still, this is not just a story about cars. The rise in compliance began before the EV boom started in 2020. Another reason is simply that the deafening roar of construction has subsided. The once-frenzied pace of Chinese urban development slowed sharply and, in many places, ground to a halt after the property crisis of 2021. In the past, visitors would marvel at how skylines changed with every trip. Today, it is remarkable how little cities like Beijing and Shanghai are changing.

Meanwhile, city planners have been quietly working to dampen the din. Last year, China laid 32mn square metres of noise-reducing road surfaces and installed 833,000 metres of sound barriers. Local governments have rolled out no-honking zones, barred heavy-duty trucks from city centres and set up noise-monitoring devices in parks that alert officials to overly rowdy activity.

As city traffic grows quieter, another irritant has become harder to ignore: other people. China recorded close to six million noise complaints last year, with 71 per cent linked to “social activities” — shouting, music and noisy neighbours. But even here, officials are taking action. Noisy bars and clubs have been closed down or relocated. Jiangxi government last year launched what they pithily described as a “Joint Law Enforcement Campaign to Control Noise Pollution from KTV Venues”, fining venues if their patrons’ wailing could be heard from the streets. After years of being woken up by noisy drivers, I have developed a world-class collection of earplugs, optimised for maximum noise cancellation. I still use them on my travels. But when I’m at home, they stay in the drawer.

20’S PLENTY

20mph is becoming the norm. More than half – 120 out of 208 – of local authorities in the UK, covering 48% of the total population have a policy of 20mph being the norm for most urban/village roads. In addition to the proven road safe benefits, it cuts traffic noise since there is a direct link between the speed of a vehicle and the noise it produces.

DR ARLINE BRONZAFT

THE PIONEERING INTERNATIONAL NOISE CAMPAIGNER DIED AT THE END OF 2025

Val Weedon MBE, Honorary President UK Noise Association, penned this tribute to her good friend

The UK Noise Association team were deeply saddened to hear of the passing of our dear friend and fellow campaigner Dr. Arline Bronzaft who died on October 29th surrounded by her close family. She had been bravely fighting an illness for some months with so much determination, which reflected her boundless character as a campaigner. Although Arline was based in New York we always saw her as one of our team. She contributed so much to the work we have been doing in the UK and with our European and worldwide partners. She contributed a chapter on Noise and Health for our book, Why Noise Matters, published in 2011.

Arline was committed from a young age to helping and improving her community. As an adult Arline studied Environmental Psychology and became Professor Emerita of Lehman College in New York. She served as an advisor to five New York City mayors as the chair of the Noise Committee of GrowNYC.org. By demonstrating the adverse effects of noise on mental and physical health, Dr. Bronzaft helped the Department of Environmental Protection of New York City to update the NYC noise code in order to bring the decibel levels down in the city. This noise code has become a model for other cities. She assisted in the implementation of a noise education curriculum in the NYC public school system and helped NYC develop a readable Subway Map which has become a model for other cities.

On a personal level she was the loveliest person in the world. She was friendly, encouraging, positive and productive. Her mantra, or belief, was that if there was a problem, by working in partnership with

others there was always a solution. She embraced everyone she came into contact with and worked tirelessly helping individuals and cooperating with numerous organisations. She was the ultimate team player and had so much enthusiasm as well as ideas.

Arline was a one-off trailblazer. Back in the 1970's, her landmark study into the effects of noise on children's learning changed everything for noise campaigners around the world, especially for us here in the UK who had been struggling to convince government and professionals working in the field of acoustics that noise did have an impact on people's health and wellbeing. They dismissed a lot of complainants as being over-sensitive, neurotic or troublemakers. Arline's work opened doors for discussion and although the struggle continues, her achievements have ensured that progress cannot be undone.

May her spirit of love, care and consideration continue to inspire and drive positive change for years to come. RIP dear Arline, we will miss you immensely.

ELECTION SPECIAL

In May there will be elections for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and local elections in vast swathes of England, including all the London boroughs. Noise is a devolved issue in Scotland and Wales. And noise is an area where local authorities can make a difference. Indeed, it is an area where they are required to act. While funding has been a problem for all local authorities, some have been more effective in tackling it than others.

In March we will be producing a special issue of The Bottom Rung focusing on the elections.

An interesting podcast from nonoise podcasts. It is an interview with Dr Eulalia Peris who is the author of the recent, much-praised report from the European Environment Agency on the impact environmental (mainly transport) noise: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fvJzbsMlyI&t=31s

IMPACTED BY NOISE?

Become a Member

We have introduced a new membership scheme. Members will receive our briefings and reports as well as invites to our events. No fixed annual fee but we suggest £20.

Email johnstewart2@btconnect.com for details

Website Address

http://www.uknoiseassociation.com/

Reports, Briefings, Blogs, News

Check it out!

Help! I've got a noise problem!

You can contact:
The Noise Abatement Society
https://noiseabatementsociety.org/

Helpline on 01273 823 850;
email info@noise-abatement.org

Noise Nuisance provides information and help from experts.
https://noisenuisance.org/about-us/

ASB Help, a charity which aims to provide information and advice to victims of anti-social behaviour
https://asbhelp.co.uk/noisy-neighbours-noise/

Noisedirect
08453 31 32 30

Independent advice line from noise professionals

The Bottom Rung **is a quarterly journal, edited by John Stewart. We are always looking for contributions, be it articles or opinion pieces.**
Email johnstewart2@btconnect.com

Our blog site is at:
https://www.cutnoise2day.co.uk/
Twitter: @cutnoise

Listen and Watch!

A selection of watchable noise videos

https://youtu.be/QKrFXZ-0E7w
An outstanding video, shot in London, from our friends at SoundPrint. How noisy are London neighborhoods Covent Garden and Soho? Is it safe to have a conversation in a busy food hall? Is the public aware of safe noise levels?

https://youtu.be/kFh_OdMb5v8
How noise is all around us and silence is hard to find. Refreshing, fun, watchable

https://youtu.be/FDJY1EuhLwI
Leaf Blowers

https://youtu.be/f7DQ3SgSg0c
Living 1600ft from a wind turbine

https://youtu.be/qd-k0rHS-DM
Traffic: noise from M8 in Central Glasgow

https://youtu.be/NR1lLokkp28
'Boom' cars in Manchester

https://youtu.be/G2fDzqqg23Y
Loud music ruins Soho Square in London (listen first with the sound off)

Bradford noise-detecting camera to crack down on boy racers - BBC News
Widespread coverage in papers on the roll-out of noise cameras.

https://youtu.be/dBVCU8xuG9E
When will we start taking noise pollution seriously?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMGniph-uPo
A fascinating discussion by campaigners from 4 continents discussing aviation noise. Part of UECNA's recent conference: www.uecna.eu

You'll find more videos on our website.