



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Sound Thinking

The state of noise harm

Noise is acknowledged to be an overlooked pollutant that has a consistent impact on human health. The 2022-23 House of Lords Science and Technology Committee Report on neglected pollutants outlined the current scientific understanding of the impact on human health. The report's definition of noise is "unwanted sound", which can be broken down into pitch and volume, and is the basis for how noise is measured and tackled. The Government response to the Lords report recognised 'that noise is second only to poor air quality as an environmental cause of ill health in Europe, with impacts including increased risk of cardiovascular and metabolic disease, annoyance, sleep disturbance and cognitive impairment'.

Exposure to noise

A significant future-facing issue in terms of the recording of noise complaints is emerging sources of noise. This means there is a need for Environmental Health (EH) teams in local authorities (LAs) in England and Wales to record and respond to new or emerging risks to residents' wellbeing. These come from sources such as Air Source Heat Pumps (ASHPs) as well as from social factors, such as short term let properties which are booked online.

Emerging technical sources of noise can be influenced by wider government policies regarding energy generation, including the greater establishment of onshore wind generation and the provision of grants towards the installation of ASHPs. Building up an awareness of the noise implications arising from these sources underpins the development and application of guidance for England and Wales.

What is currently recorded?

There are multiple sources of noise registered in noise complaints by local authority officers. For example, looking at the region of South West England, 16 out of 21 councils which responded to CIEH's Freedom of Information (FOI) request confirmed that they did record a breakdown of noise complaints by noise source. However, on looking at the lists of noise sources recorded by different councils, a large variation in the types and number of noise sources recorded on databases can be seen. One council employed 20 different codes within their database whereas another only utilised four (domestic, commercial, construction and industrial).

How we record noise complaints: now and next

CIEH's Ipsos polling asked respondents what measures they would like to have implemented to improve the complaints process. The most popular things included were for the ability to report noise online (32%), the option to report anonymously (31%), greater confidence that action will be taken by the council (28%) and updates on what action is being taken (27%). Overall numbers do indicate support for greater ease in reporting with 59% of respondents supporting reporting flexibility and accessibility. This indicates that use of technology in reporting is something the public would support to improve the reporting process with 18% of respondents also believing a dedicated app would help to resolve the issue.

Policy recommendations

1. Consistent database coding across England and Wales with national coding categories.

Consult with stakeholders at the local and national level on noise source categories and publish official lists of the coding categories for use by local authorities in England and Wales.

2. Provide a mechanism within consistent coding to allow adaptation of new noise sources into national coding categories list.

Within the consultation for the consistent coding recommendation, we recommend discussion of a mechanism that allows for local authorities to report newer or emerging sources of noise. There should also be an agreed mechanism for approving new source of noise to be added to the list.

3. Ensure guidance is provided to councils going through Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

National coding categories by April 2028 would enable new unitary councils to record noise complaints with consistent coding in place from their first day and would provide a strong basis to then roll out to other unitary councils in England and Wales with practical advice on making the necessary database changes. Failing this, guidance to lead councils through transition must be provided.

4. Individual noise source reduction targets added into future noise reduction plans.

The UK and Welsh Governments should use the possibilities derived from consistent coding to analyse data on noise source numbers and year on year trends. Once reliable, to effectively inform noise reduction targets including measures to tackle specific noise sources and outlining success and health improvement through reductions in overall and highly complained about sources of noise.

5. Review resource allocation for EH services and Full Time Equivalency (FTE) for noise and nuisance work.

Governments should consider whether there is currently sufficient resourcing for councils to effectively tackle noise complaints. CIEH members have repeatedly explained during the process of creating this report that workforce shortages have a detrimental impact on how effectively they can respond to noise complaints in their area. The adoption of mobile phone apps and other technologies may help, but if there is an inadequate number of Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs) who can travel across their authority and work to resolve noise complaints, the use of technology will not improve services and will not change the amount of time residents are exposed to noise.

6. Revisit the recommendations from the 2023 House of Lords Neglected Pollutants report.

The UK Government should complete its follow up to its 2023 response to the House of Lords report and revisit its key policy asks around noise including reemphasis of the Noise Policy Statement for England as a good overall framework for tackling noise, an independent advisory panel for noise in DEFRA, and specific targets on reducing noise pollution effectively.

7. Research into any inequalities arising from differing service provision by local authorities.

Our survey data highlighted a desire for the swift resolution of noise complaints yet our noise complaint data highlighted differences between the types of service provided by different local authorities. This highlights that there might be inequalities across different boundaries. A better understanding of topics like the provision of out of hours services and the number of EHPs employed to investigate noise complaints could help to further an evidence base and support policymakers on how to reduce noise harms.

8. Include noise as an 'Environmental Factor' when Strategic Authorities implement the new Health Inequalities Duty in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 to support reductions of noise harm in deprived communities.

Local and Strategic authorities should consider including noise as an 'Environmental Factor' within the list of general health determinants of the Health Inequalities Duty in Section 45 of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026.

9. Wider take up of noise reporting applications and other technologies.

CIEH's polling indicates greater accessibility to noise complaint reporting services would improve respondents' experience in making noise complaints. Wider take up of these applications by LAs that don't yet use them could yield a more effective process that supports both residents and EH teams.