Joint Guidance on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Practicality and Reliability of Baseline Sound Level Surveying and the Provision of Sound & Noise Impact Assessments

By the Association of Noise Consultants [ANC] and the Institute of Acoustics [IOA]

Version 5

Containing links to the guidance issued for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

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Introduction

This is the fifth version of this joint guidance and the months that have passed since its previous issue have seen the easing of lockdown measures and the phased re-opening of businesses, albeit with some operating restrictions. Consequently, there has been a gradual increase in road traffic flows towards those which existed prior to the outbreak of the pandemic in the UK. However, there continues to be a significant proportion of the population working from home where they may not have before, along with the guidance from the Government to avoid using public transport, wherever possible. Railways and, in particular, aviation continue to be affected more significantly in terms of number of movements.

The gradual return to work means that this guidance has to change and it now recommends a shift in emphasis to the return of site survey measurements of the existing noise climate as the default position, wherever possible, with this data being supplemented by other sources, if necessary.

Many Members of the ANC and IOA, are continuing to find their normal work practices impacted in the provision of Sound and Noise Impact Assessments. Even where opportunities to work from home or a return to the office exist, it is not 'business as usual'. Nevertheless, there continues to be the requirement to maintain as far as possible the standard of our working practices, and also to maintain the flow of acoustic reporting which has an important role in the fabric and functioning of society. Acoustic reports are utilised for many purposes including to assist planning applications, the discharge of planning conditions and the implementation of Building Regulations. Continuing to provide high quality acoustic reporting in a timely manner for scrutiny by regulators and decision makers will allow the important aspects of planning to continue to move forward to support our society in the longer term beyond this national emergency.

As the responsible bodies, the ANC and IOA are keen to ensure that it is 'business as usual', as far as is practicably possible and responsible; not only to support continued on-going financial stability for our members, but also for the myriad strands of society that rely on our reports and input to projects. With some limitations and some self-imposed changes in pre-COVID-19 travel behaviour for all, we recognise that there remain some instances where the manner in which acoustic assessment and reporting is carried out needs to be adapted. We have, therefore, reiterated below some changes in working practices in the production of such reports, where these may be necessary. In so doing, it is still important to minimise uncertainties when determining baseline conditions, in a clear and transparent way. Furthermore, by good communication between those preparing the reports and those that will be reviewing them, the planning process (and other relevant processes) will be able to continue as smoothly as possible, otherwise there could be delays of many months.

We consider that by implementing these measures the provision of Sound and Noise Impact Assessments will be able to continue in a timely manner.

Competence

Site surveys should take place unless they cannot be carried out in complete accordance with current Government requirements. Where they cannot, alternative methods of characterising baseline conditions may be used. These are set out below. Acoustics professionals are skilled in understanding how best to use those techniques so that the outcome is representative and the conclusions drawn are technically robust, so that clients and decision-makers can come to well-informed judgements.

Baseline Sound Level Characterisation

The COVID-19 outbreak has presented new challenges in obtaining representative baseline sound levels because road, air and rail transport usage have changed due to travel restrictions, changes in travel behaviour and social distancing measures.

The indications suggest that road traffic is returning to pre-COVID conditions (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-use-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic) albeit it is not the same and other sound sources may also have been affected – for example, due to changes in operating patterns at industrial and commercial premises. However, now that site visits can routinely occur, measured survey data should be used as the default. This can be supplemented by data from other sources such as using existing data (for example, from previous local surveys and noise maps) or undertaking baseline sound predictions to establish an appropriate robust estimate of baseline conditions.

The most appropriate option to use must be determined on a case-by-case basis, assessing the level of uncertainty and including this information in the reporting. More importantly than ever, before progressing with any methodology, there should be discussion of the intended approach with the relevant regulating authority.

Methodology

For some projects there will be similar challenges to those experienced for the baseline sound level characterisation, when determining the sound levels associated with the development. Wherever possible, a site visit to understand the sound environment will assist the professional in understanding the sources contributing to the sound environment, and where these may not be typical due to current circumstances. Any such site visits would need to comply with any restrictions on movement and ensure that social distancing is embedded within the site visit methodology.

For transport schemes, there may still need to be some reliance on predicted sound levels to describe the baseline conditions, with a corresponding need to source flow/activity data. There are now many sources of transport data available and these should be used, where possible, along with previously made direct site measurements to describe baseline conditions. Links to data obtained from the most recent Noise Mapping carried out by the four devolved

administrations and the Republic of Ireland are shown in the Appendix. Also shown are links to some road transport data sources.

Where sound from existing facilities is needed to inform future noise levels, or where it is the existing sound that is being assessed, enquiries will be needed to understand whether or not the facility has returned to operating as normal. Discussions with other operators may be needed to understand whether nearby facilities are operating normally, and whether any changes might affect sound emissions. Examples may include where the BS4142 methodology is being used to assess the impact from an industrial / commercial facility following complaints, or where existing machinery needs to be measured to use as a reference for predicted future levels.

The acoustics professional will need to consider whether alternative sources of information in respect of sound levels can reasonably be used. Where appropriate, a case should be made regarding why the proposed alternative methods are suitable for a robust assessment, and should clearly set out the estimated uncertainties in the assessment. In cases relating to the investigation of complaints, it may now be possible to carry out site measurements although caution should be applied as to whether the conditions are representative of normal activities. In some circumstances, this type of assessment may need to be postponed.

As with the determination of baseline conditions, discussions with the relevant regulators, who may be able to provide vital local knowledge, will be key.

Liaison with Regulators and Decision Makers

Liaison between acoustics professionals and relevant regulators is especially important during this period where characterising environmental sound climates might still not be possible in the conventional way. It is recognised that projects should be assessed on a case by case basis. Where site measurements may not be possible, a pragmatic approach may be needed with regard to the information required for planning applications and/or the discharge of planning conditions. Having said that, it will continue to be important that such assessments remain robust, and follow current good practice.

In these circumstances, one outcome may be that supplementary information will be required at a later date or controlled by condition to allow planning authorities to maintain momentum in the planning system during this period.

Latest Government Guidance

Guidance issued to employers and businesses is provided on the Government website. The latest updates can be found here:

https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19

There is an acknowledgement by Government that businesses should be returning to normal. Therefore, where there is a need for outdoor noise monitoring work this should now occur **as long as it can be done safely and fully complies with Government social distancing requirements.** However, as mentioned above, if the purpose of the monitoring is to determine typical conditions, it must be remembered that in some circumstances the current conditions may not be typical.

Guidance from the Devolved Administrations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)

In addition to the information published by the Westminster government, there is separate guidance for those working in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This guidance is not necessarily the same.
Therefore, it is essential that reference is made to the relevant national guidance if planning a site visit in those countries.

Links to the various guidance are given below:

Scotland

https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-returning-to-work/

Wales

https://gov.wales/coronavirus-covid-19-employers-and-businesses-guidance

https://gov.wales/taking-all-reasonable-measures-maintain-physical-distancing-workplace

Northern Ireland

https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-workplace-safety-guidelines-and-social-distancing

Summary

Although businesses are returning to work following a phased re-opening over recent months, it is recognised that conditions are not the same as they were a year ago. In summary, we continue to experience some deviation from typical conditions but yet, it is essential that we continue to exercise our professional skills diligently and cope with these circumstances where they may have changed. Some of the advice contained in this guidance is not new, and all professionals have probably had to cope previously with unusual circumstances from time to time in their day to day life. It is just that, at the moment, some days continue to present unusual situations.

It is important that decision making and associated development continue, including the planning process and the discharge of planning conditions. But it is also important to avoid poor decisions being made because the highest available standard of acoustic assessment was not maintained during these challenging times.

The Association of Noise Consultants

The Institute of Acoustics

APPENDIX
Noise Mapping Data

The strategic noise mapping covers the major sources of transportation noise within large urban agglomerations and along road and rail corridors between them and was designed to provide a global view of noise exposure in line with the requirements of the Environmental Noise Directive for reporting above 55 dB L_{den} and 50 dB L_{night}. It does not include all possible noise sources, or all urban areas in the UK and Ireland, however it may help to provide an initial screening for sites in the vicinity of the mapped sources.

Links have been included for downloading the results in GIS format, plus an online map viewer

England

Data https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-noise-mapping-2019

Maps: http://www.extrium.co.uk/noiseviewer.html

Northern Ireland

Data: https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/environmental-noise-directive-noise-mapping

Maps: https://appsd.daera-ni.gov.uk/noisemapviewer/index.html

Scotland

Data: http://map.sepa.org.uk/atom/Noise.atom
http://map.sepa.org.uk/atom/NOISE_ROUND3.atom

Maps: https://noise.environment.gov.scot/noisemap/

Wales

Data: https://lle.gov.wales/catalogue/item/EnvironmentalNoiseMapping2017/?lang=en

Maps: http://extrium.co.uk/walesnoiseviewer.html

Republic of Ireland

Data: http://gis.epa.ie/GetData/Download

Maps: https://gis.epa.ie/EPAMaps/

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Transport Data Sources

Department for Transport

https://roadtraffic.dft.gov.uk/#6/55.254/-6.053/basemap-regions-countpoints

Highways England

http://webtris.highwaysengland.co.uk/

Site Suitability Indicator

https://ssi.noiseconsultants.co.uk/