

Neighbour Noise: Makers and Sufferers



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Written by Dr. Fiona Campbell

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Executive Summary

Neighbour noise is sound which affects people in their homes or gardens and is a direct result of the activities of their neighbours, their neighbours guests or their animals. There are many different types of neighbour noise and people typically suffer from more than one, although they are most likely to complain about music, barking dogs and parties.

The aim of the research described in this report was to understand noise makers and sufferers better in order to inform a national campaign. Key findings are summarised below:

- Just over one-third of the adult population admitted to making noise that affected their neighbours, while nearly half of people reported being affected by noise in their homes.
- Noise making and noise suffering had a strong life stage component with noise makers most likely to be younger, pre-family or with a young family, while noise sufferers typically belonged to older households without any children.
- When people made noise they were often unaware of the extent to which it affected their neighbours, or if they were aware they chose to ignore it. In this study, noise makers consistently rated each of 13 noises as having less effect on their neighbours than their neighbours rated the same noises as having on them.
- In many cases, noise sufferers were really suffering. Neighbour noise made them feel angry, tense, frustrated, sad and desperate. In over two-thirds of cases the problem had been going on for six months or more. In just under half of cases it had been present for a year or more.
- Resigned victim was the most despairing segment and at 31.1% of the total noise suffering population also the biggest group.
- Noise sufferers often experienced more than one type of noise, and problems were often part of a bigger dispute with neighbours and other quality of life issues.

- Noise makers who took part in this research said that they wanted their neighbours to talk to them directly about their loud behaviour, and to do so early before the problem escalated. Noise sufferers, on the other hand, were reluctant to talk to their neighbours and preferred solutions to their problem that would allow them to report noisy neighbours anonymously or had someone else, such as a warden, act on their behalf.

- Noise makers admitted that they were often insincere when they promised neighbours to reduce their loud behaviour, while attempts by noise sufferers to deal with their problem had never had a positive outcome feeding the cycle of recrimination, selfishness and helplessness.

- It's not just noise that mattered. Other factors made the problem worse such as poor insulation, high density housing meant people were never very far from other people, mixed neighbourhoods with people with different lifestyles and at different life stages all living together.

These findings reveal that neighbour noise is a complex problem that does not have a single solution. Noise makers and sufferers are two very different groups of people. What would work for noise makers would be unlikely to work for the majority of sufferers.

For these reasons, ENCAMS decided to adopt a multi-pronged approach. Through our campaign we targeted two segments, one noise maker and one noise sufferer, both of whom we believed would be most likely to change their behaviour. We offered these groups a range of different solutions to facilitate that process including a national campaign, a website with practical information and guidance, a helpline and leaflet

Throughout the campaign we did, however, stress one message that was common to all groups and that was the need to have a good relationship between neighbours. Not only can this stop problems from happening in the first place; it can make them easier to deal with when they do occur.

1. Introduction

1.1 What Is Neighbour Noise?

Neighbour noise is sound which affects people in their homes or gardens and is a direct result of the activities of their neighbours, their neighbours guests or their animals¹. There are many different types of neighbour noise and people typically suffer from more than one, although they are most likely to complain about music, barking dogs and parties².

Neighbour noise occurs at all times of the day and night, but the problem tends to get progressively worse between the hours of 6 am and 11 pm³. The majority of complaints to local authorities are made between 10 pm and 2 am, whereas there are relatively low levels of disturbance between 5 am and 12 pm. Music is the primary source of nuisance between evening and early morning (6 pm to 3 am), while other noises cause more disturbance in the morning (7 am to 10 am) and the afternoon (3 pm to 5 pm).

1.2 What Are The Effects Of Neighbour Noise?

Neighbour noise occurs at levels far below those likely to cause pain or long-term damage to hearing. What it does do, however, is disrupt domestic activities such as sleeping or resting, which in turn can lead to lack of concentration, irritability and reduced efficiency⁴. It can also disrupt leisure activities such as watching the television or listening to the radio or music.

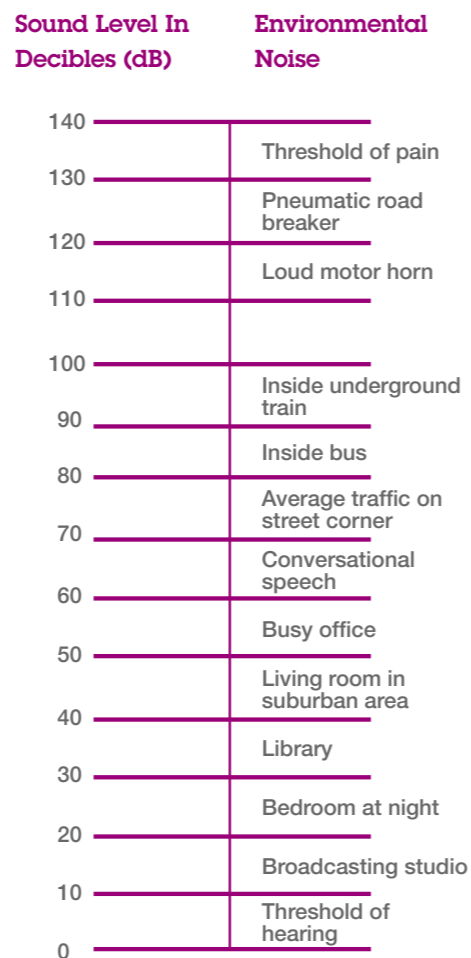
According to research by the Building Research Establishment (BRE), when neighbour noise first occurs or if it is relatively quiet a person will ignore it, wonder what it is or express mild irritation⁵. The longer the noise persists, the louder or more unacceptable it becomes, the angrier or more anxious the person will grow. If the noise continues for a long time or has an emotive content then the person can become hostile or depressed. In some cases, victims of repeated or continuous noise from burglar alarms or late night parties have even been known to resort to criminal damage or violent physical assault to eliminate the source of the complaint⁶.

How noise affects a person is not a simple matter but the result of the complex interplay between different factors. Annoyance depends on the nature of noise⁷.

Some noises are enjoyable, for example, such as birds singing, children playing or people laughing. Others are accepted or tolerated (e.g. road traffic, dogs barking for a short period of time). But there are some that are unacceptable and likely to result in an adverse reaction, particularly if they are loud; continuous; thought to be unnecessary; of unknown duration or source; or have emotive connotations such as a baby crying or a man shouting.

The context in which noise occurs is also important. Most people accept that noise will take place at certain times, but will be much more irritated by noise that occurs during the evening than during the day⁸.

Finally, the characteristics of the person who hears the noise will also determine their reaction to it – their age, gender, working status, lifestyle and personality. Parents, for example, are more understanding of noise from children than single people or older people². Young people also have a higher tolerance to noise.



1.3 Is Neighbour Noise A Problem?

Neighbour noise is a part of modern living. A survey by MORI found that two in three people (63%) hear noise from their neighbours to some degree⁹. This does not mean that all people are irritated by it though. A survey by BRE found that 69% of people were satisfied with the noise environment in which they lived¹⁰. Noise was a problem for only 16% and a significant problem for 5%. However, the extent to which people are affected by noise can rise significantly amongst certain groups such as those living in flats, town or city centres, council or social housing².

Neighbour noise is not the biggest source of noise that affects people in their own home. Road traffic and air craft noise are much more widespread problems^{2,3}. Neighbour noise is, however, one of the most annoying sources of noise. There are at least two reasons for this. First, some types of noise are predictable or are perceived to have a purpose and are easy to adapt to. Neighbour noise, on the other hand, is unpredictable. It can occur at any time of the day and night and often for no discernable reason. Second, neighbour noise may be seen to be indicative of the fact that the noise maker has no consideration about the feelings of the noise sufferer.

There is no doubt, though, that the problem is getting worse. In a study by BRE the proportion of the UK population exposed to levels exceeding guideline values by the World Health Organisation (WHO) were estimated¹¹. The guideline level of 55 dB is suggested to protect the majority of people from being seriously annoyed during the day and the night-time guideline of 48 dB is suggested so that people may sleep with bedroom windows open. According to BRE, in 2000/1 54% of people were exposed to noise levels exceeding guideline values by the WHO during the day and 67% during the night. Furthermore, the proportion of people exposed to noise levels exceeding daytime guidelines appears to have decreased since 1990, whereas the proportion of people exposed to night time exceeding guideline values has increased.

Another reason for suggesting that the problem has got worse is that between 1984/5 and 2004/5 complaints about noise from domestic premises increased almost five times¹². Complaints about road works and construction noise, on the other hand, were 3.5 times greater in 2004/5 than in 1984/5, while complaints about noise from industrial and commercial premises doubled in the same period. Complaints about road traffic rose until 1997/8, but there have been fewer than in 1984/5 in most years since then.

1.4 It's Not Just Noise That Matters

An increase in neighbour noise is not, however, the only possible explanation for the increase in the number of complaints¹³. Other factors are likely to be important such as absent or ineffective insulation, poor relationships with neighbours, increased sensitivity to noise and an increase in the likelihood to complain about noise¹⁴.

Noise doesn't occur in isolation either. It occurs with other types of noise and other liveability problems¹⁵. Research by MORI found that noise disputes formed a package of problems between neighbours that included litter, dog fouling and rubbish with noise becoming the focal point for these wider grievances. The research also found that one in seven people (14%) identified neighbour noise as an issue that affected their quality of life. The problem was less widespread than litter (33%), dog fouling (27%), graffiti (21%) and vandalism (20%), but comparable to abandoned vehicles (17%), street drinking (13%) and drug use (9%). Among certain groups such as residents in high density flats it was the most important issue.

1.5 What Can Be Done About Neighbour Noise?

Noise sufferers often contact noise makers and then the authorities such as Environmental Health, the police and the council¹¹. However, their experience of making a complaint is often discouraging. Complainants report being passed backwards and forwards between different council departments, while local authority procedures are often perceived as too rigid to provide an appropriate approach to dispute resolution. Local authorities can improve the complaints procedure by implementing a number of solutions. For example, they can streamline record keeping systems; strengthen communications between departments such as environmental health, housing tenancy support, and local housing offices; offer initiatives to encourage residents to improve their communication skills; and provide more opportunities for resolution through mediation.

Increasingly, there has been a move towards the use of mediation as a more amicable way of resolving noise disputes than legal proceedings⁶. Mediation involves a neutral third person to aid negotiation between two conflicting parties. It was first adopted in the UK as a means of dealing with noise and has a 59% success rate.

1.6 ENCAMS Work

ENCAMS interest in noise has grown steadily over the past four years. In 2003, we were asked by Defra to undertake a neighbour noise campaign. This was not an area in which we had campaigned previously so we spent some time talking to councils, noise groups and noise sufferers to understand them in detail and find out how they dealt with the problem of noisy neighbours. This work indicated that there was a particular type of noise sufferer who was unlikely to complain to their council because they felt isolated in their suffering. The campaign was targeted at them.

In 2005, we were asked once again by Defra to campaign on neighbourhood noise and undertook an in-depth piece of market research to understand the attitudes and behaviours of noise makers and sufferers. This used a technique called market segmentation¹⁶, which divides a large group

of people (e.g. the public) into distinct subsets that behave in the same way or have similar needs. Each segment is homogenous in terms of their needs and attitudes, so they are likely to respond in similar ways to a marketing strategy. We hoped that by undertaking this research we would be able to devise a campaign that would target both noise makers and noise sufferers at the same time.

The purpose of this report is to describe the results of this market research. We believe that it will help practitioners such as local authorities, housing associations and the police understand the problem of neighbourhood noise: who suffers from it and who makes it. However, while this report provides information that can be used to devise solutions to neighbour noise, its purpose is not to specify what those solutions might be. Nor would ENCAMS be qualified to provide such information. For further information on this topic, other resources¹⁷ are available.

Neighbour noise is sound which affects people in their homes or gardens and is a direct result of the activities of their neighbours, their neighbours guests or their animals



In 2003, Defra asked ENCAMS to undertake a neighbour noise campaign. The campaign was piloted in two areas – Stoke-on-Trent and Leeds and involved a 24 hour helpline for noise sufferers, while posters appeared on billboards and bus shelters advertising the service a radio advert promoted the service.

The campaign was covered in the regional media and the pilot councils received and dealt with a total of 998 calls.

Fifty telephone interviews were conducted with a random sample of people who used the service. This revealed that 82% were satisfied with their call to the helpline. On the whole people expected the culprit to be visited and while in some cases this was done, in other cases people felt their telephone call had led to no action or they had been visited. For this reason, 69%, were satisfied with the outcome of their call.

These results suggest that the campaign was successful in raising awareness of the problem and the out of hours service. However, people's expectations about what they should receive from this service may be greater than the ability to deliver it.

2. Methodology

Research was carried out in three stages. These are described in more detail in this section. 'Respondents' who took part in each stage were recruited according to their age, gender, housing type and life stage.

2.1 Stage 1

The first stage involved sixteen standard length focus groups held in various locations across England. The output from these focus groups was analysed to spot clusters of attitudes and behaviour, and thereby identify potential segments.

Half of the focus groups were conducted with people who admitted to making noise that affected their neighbours. The recruits contained a mixture of people who had been prosecuted or warned against noise nuisance and those who had not.

The aim of these focus groups was to find out what kind of noise people made; if they had been challenged about their noise in the past; and how relations were in general between noise makers and their neighbours.

The remaining focus groups were conducted with participants who were personally suffering from a noise problem. Half the group had complained either to their noisy neighbours directly or to an official third party and half hadn't made any complaints.

The aim of the noise sufferer research was to understand the attitudes and behaviours of people who were suffering from a noise problem caused by their neighbour; to find out how noise impacted on their daily lives; and what type of noise they endured. In addition, we wanted to find out to what extent sufferers complained about the noise they experienced and what actions, if any, had they taken to alleviate it.

2.2 Stage 2

Stage 2 consisted of standard length focus groups held in various locations across England. The aim of these focus groups, half of which were conducted with noise makers the other half with noise sufferers, was to verify the segments identified during stage one and test different solutions with them.

As well as the focus groups, six ethnographic interviews were also conducted (four with noise makers and two with noise sufferers). The interviews took place in the respondent's home during the day and early evening and gave the researchers first hand experience of the noise problem and how it was affected by other factors such as housing type and poor insulation.

2.3 Stage 3

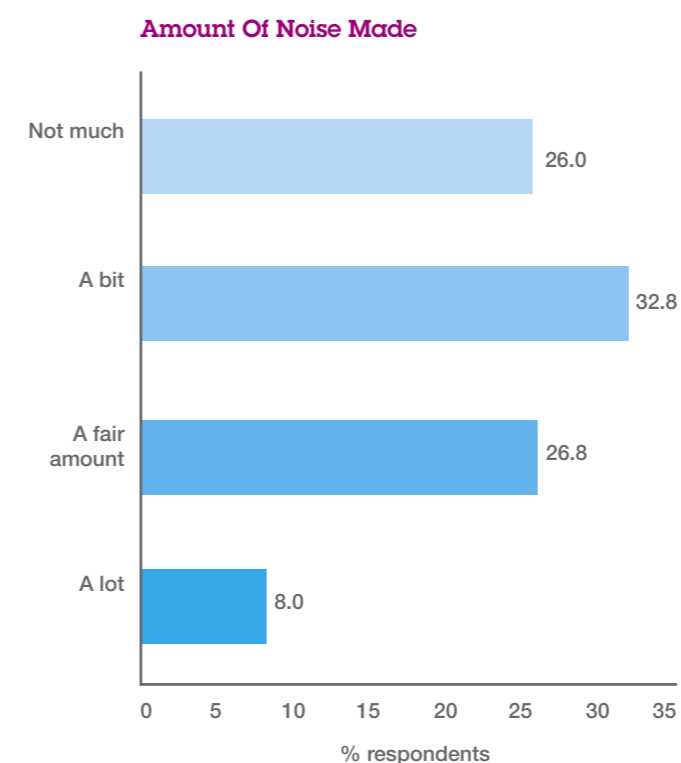
In stage three, the noise maker and sufferer segments verified during the previous stage of research were quantified by an on-street questionnaire. A total of 1,700 individuals (850 noise makers, 850 noise sufferers) aged 18 - 75 were sampled nationally from across England. As well as questions about noise, this survey also collected information about demographics and lifestyle.

3. Noise Makers

Just over one-third (36%) of the adult population admit to making noise that affects their neighbours. This section looks at neighbour noise in detail and the people who make it, focussing particularly on how the problem has been dealt with in the past and how it should be dealt with in the future. 'Respondents' comments are verbatim and are shown in quotation marks.

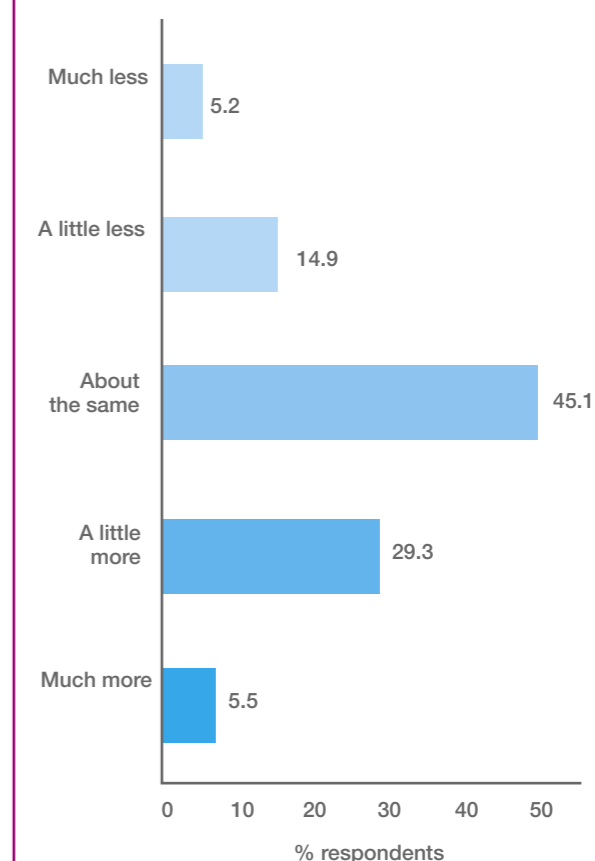
3.1 Amounts And Type Of Noise

Amongst those people who admitted to making noise that affected their neighbours, the majority made either a bit or not much (65%). However, just over one in three (35%) made a fair amount or a lot of noise.

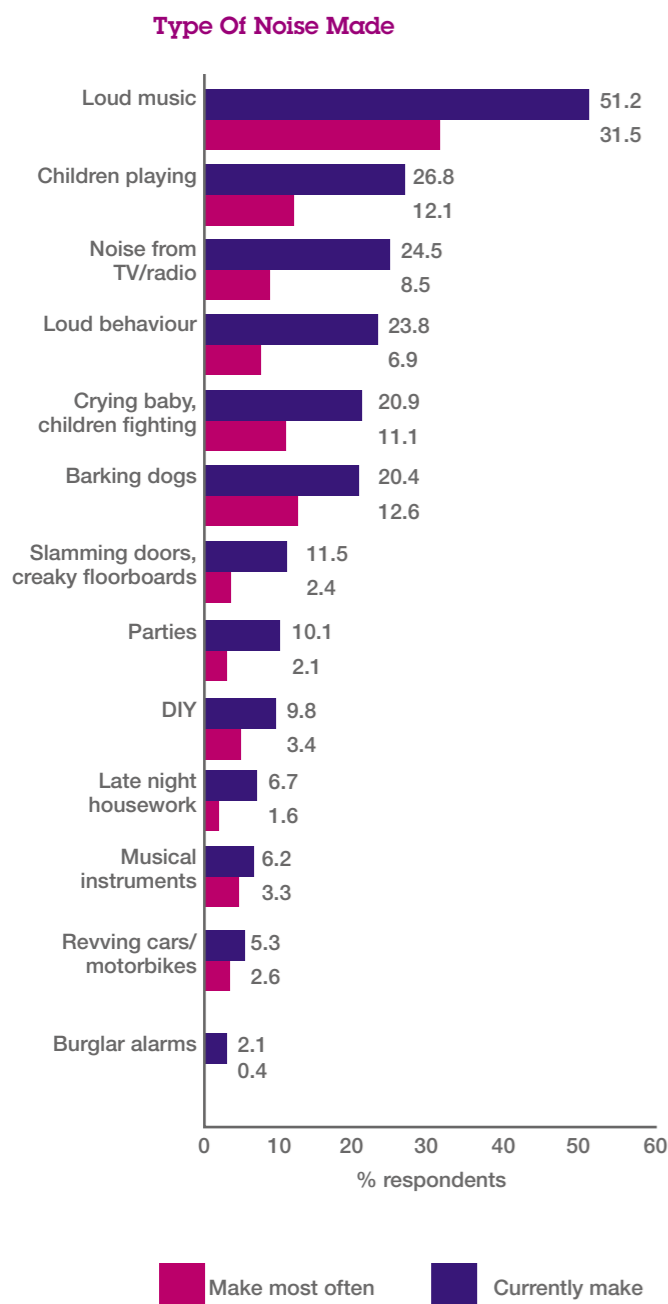


A similar pattern of results were found when people were asked how much noise they made relative to their neighbours. 65% made less noise than their neighbours or about the same amount (65%), whereas 35% made either a bit more or much more.

Noise Made Versus Neighbours

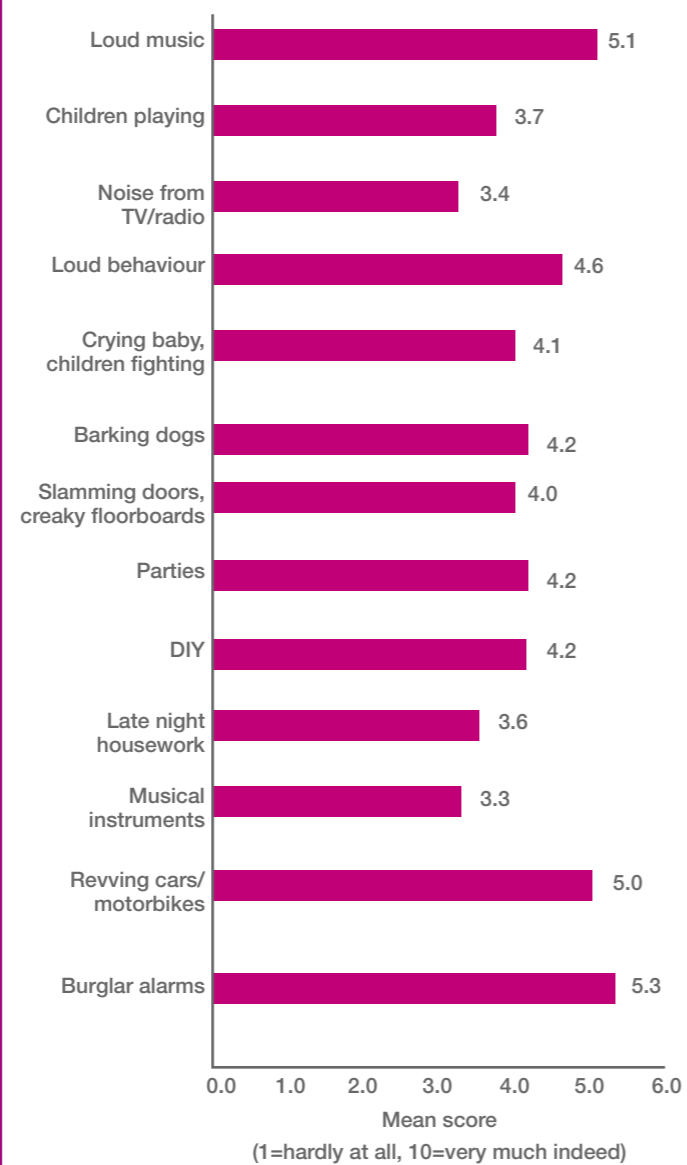


Loud music was the type of noise people made most often and were currently making at the time the research was undertaken. Other sources of noise included: children playing, noise from the TV and radio, loud behaviour, babies crying/small children fighting and barking dogs. Burglar alarms and revving cars or motorbikes were the most infrequently mentioned noises.



Noise makers were, for the most part, unaware that their behaviour affected their neighbours. On a ten-point scale (where 1 = affects my neighbours hardly at all and 10 = affects my neighbours very much indeed), the mean score for each type of noise was never above five. Furthermore, there was no obvious relationship between the frequency with which different types of noise were made and the extent to which they were perceived to affect other people. Loud music, for example, was the noise made most often, but was perceived to have the same affect on other people as the two noises made least frequently - burglar alarms and revving cars or motorbikes.

Affects Their Neighbours



3.2 What Do Noise Makers Think About Noise Sufferers?

People made noise; they also suffered from it too. This meant that, for the most part, they were able to empathise with their neighbours and put themselves in their position. Some people were, however, dismissive of their neighbour's feeling or didn't care that their noise affected them.

3.3 Noise Makers In Detail

Generally, noise makers saw themselves as reasonable people. They were often unaware that they made noise that affected their neighbours. If they were aware it was only because someone had complained about it. To them noise was an inevitable part of life. It came about as a result of socialising with friends, children playing and DIY activities. In some cases, it was even necessary – a dog barking for security, children playing nearby for safety – or it only lasted for a specific length of time and then finished.

"It's good where I live to let everyone know I've got a dog – for security."
Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

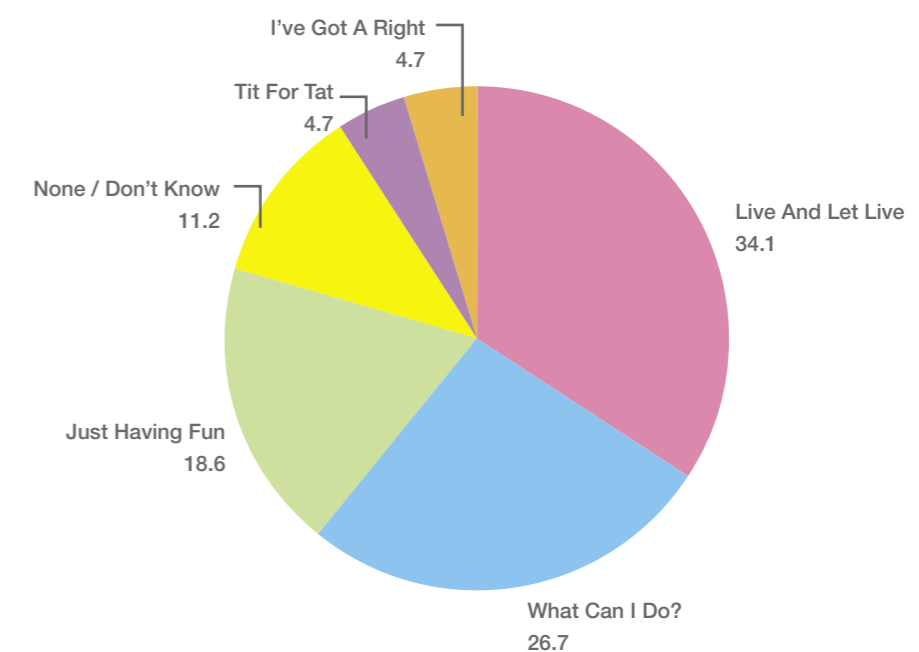
"I'd rather my kids were in the garden making noise than down the street where I can't see them."
Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

People often attempted to minimise the effect of their behaviour by avoiding making noise during unsociable hours, informing their neighbours that they would be making noise or inviting them to share in the fun if they were having a party. The absence of any complaint about noise levels was taken as an indication that they were not being too loud.

"If you warn them if you're going to start drilling, it's fine. But if you say nothing then you're going to get a knock on the door saying what the hell are you doing."
Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40 years

Noise makers shared many common attitudes and behaviours. They also differed from each other in a number of important respects and on the basis of which could be divided into five segments. These are described in more detail overleaf.

Noise Maker Segments



3.3.1 Live And Let Live

Live And Let Live was the largest segment comprising 34% of the noise making population. The defining characteristic of this group was that they were able to empathise with others and the reasons why they might need to make noise. They tended to have good relations with their neighbours and had rarely felt the need to complain to them.

"My neighbour plays the piano... at 1am... but I haven't complained because they put up with a lot of noise from us, babies crying, we have a lot of barbecues in the summer and they're always nice."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40 years

However, if a neighbour had complained about their noise, then they would feel able to complain about their neighbour's noise.

There was a fair degree of overlap between this group and another segment - Tit For Tat - which depended on their relationship with their neighbours. If people got on well with their neighbours they tended to adopt a Live And Let Live Attitude towards their noise making, but if they got on badly with their neighbours their attitude was more one of Tit For Tat.

People belonging to this group tended to be young families belonging to social class AB, and there was a skew towards living in Yorkshire and Humber. The noise they made most often was loud music.



3.3.2 What Can I Do?

At 27% of the total noise making population, What Can I Do? was the second largest segment. Quite often they didn't like the noise coming from their house just as much as their neighbours, but felt that it was a normal part of day-to-day life or there was nothing they could do about it.

"I can understand them getting cross if you've done nothing about it. But at least if you say look can you hear me telling them to be quiet, at least they know you're trying."

What Can I Do Segment

What Can I Do? tended to have children of all ages and pets (especially dogs) who made noise when they were out. They were skewed slightly towards the North. Typical noises included loud music, children playing, baby crying/children fighting and barking dogs.



3.3.3 Just Having Fun

Just Having Fun was the third largest segment comprising 19% of the noise making population. The defining characteristic of this group was that they wanted to enjoy themselves, and were very gregarious and sociable. They liked parties, barbecues and socialising with friends at home. Listening to loud music in the evening and at weekends also helped them to unwind.

They claimed that they were unsure what amount of noise was 'too loud', but that they obviously hadn't breached it because no one had complained to them. In reality though, this was an excuse and they were aware of the effect their noisy behaviour had on their neighbours but didn't care.

"I put music on when I have a few mates around. I wouldn't like it to be done to me, but then nobody has said anything to me. It's difficult, how do you know when you can and can't do something?"

Just Having Fun Segment

Members of this group tended to be young singles or couples, living in flats, especially converted houses. Of all groups they were most likely to admit to playing loud music.



3.3.4 Tit For Tat

Tit For Tat, together with I've Got A Right, were the smallest group of noise makers comprising 4.7% of the total noise making population. Tit For Tat made noise usually because their neighbours did: because they were unable to deal with the problem of their neighbour's noise making directly, in retaliation, as part of a long-standing dispute, or simply to drown out the sound they could hear.

"If they're playing loud music or listening to the telly loud, you instinctively have to turn yours up a bit; you're trying to cancel each other out but are making the problem worse."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

This group of noise makers were uncomfortable about calling their own behaviour childish, but were happy to label their neighbour's as so.

"It's childish isn't it, it's like tit for tat. I think, I'm 38, she's probably 68, I'm not going to stoop to her level. If she wants to be miserable about it let her be. She can go along her wall and flick all her sockets on and off."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 41 – 65 years

Many did not feel guilty about making noise because the fact that their neighbour did it too absolved them of any responsibility.

"When I'm at home he deliberately goes out and bangs the car door just to wind me up sometimes. So I'm not bothered when I'm playing my music on Saturday night."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

The top three sources of noise made by this group were: loud music, noise from the TV and radio and loud behaviour. They tended to be younger (i.e. 18 -34), lived in flats in the South-East of England and belonged to social classes C2 and DE.



3.3.5 I've Got A Right

I've Got A Right knew that the noise they made annoyed their neighbours but didn't care. They put their own right to make noise over their neighbours' right to a quiet life.

"My three dogs are outside, 6 – 6.30 every morning without fail they start fighting. You can see the lights going on all the way down the street, it wakes everyone up. It's just an alarm call."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 41 - 65

Members of this group tended to belong to large families, often with pets, and were fairly aggressive characters with strong personalities. They had a poor relationship with their neighbours with whom they argued about a wide variety of issues such as parking. If a neighbour complained about their noise it often made the problem worse.

"They're 60 – 70 year old people. They come around banging on my door. It gets my back up straightaway."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 - 40

Members of this group most often admitted to making the following types of noise: loud music, noise from the TV and radio, children playing, loud behaviour and DIY. They tended to be older (i.e. 55 – 64), belonged to social class DE and lived in high rise flats in the South.



3.3.6 Other Segments

There was, in addition, another segment uncovered by this study. Neighbours From Hell were a small minority who took pleasure from making deliberate noise, and about whom their own neighbours were afraid to complain to or about in case there would be a reprisal. They were deemed as beyond the scope of this research because they were part of a much broader social and / or criminal problem.

"There's been at least three fights I'm aware of and the whole building shakes when he's trying to break into doors. So that's a lot of noise when that kicks off and then when the police are raiding the place that's a whole load of other noise as well."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 - 40

3.3.7 Segment Mapping

Based on the above analysis, it was possible to map the segments on two dimensions: relationship with neighbours and willingness to change. This demonstrated that the group most likely to change their noisy behaviour in the context of a good neighbourly relationship was Live And Let Live. Neighbours From Hell were least likely to make less noise and got on worse with their neighbours. Tit For Tat and I've Got A Right were also unwilling to change and had poor relationships with their neighbours.

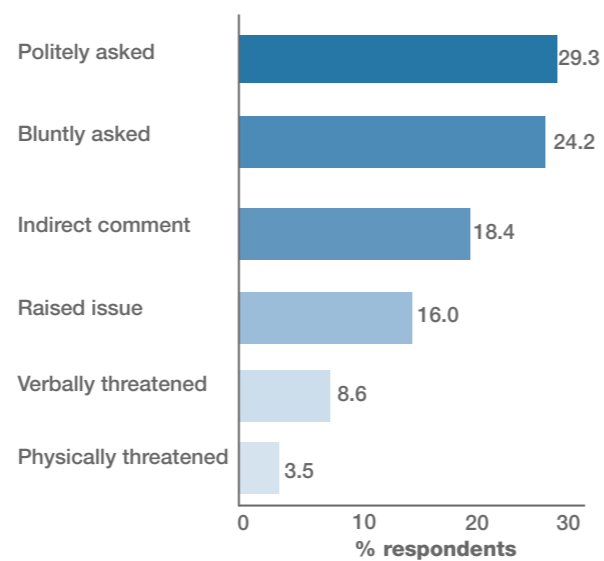
Noise Makers Map



3.4 How Was The Problem Dealt With In The Past?

Surprisingly, less than one in three (30%) noise makers had been challenged by their neighbours about their behaviour. Amongst those who had been challenged a variety of different approaches were used although in the majority of cases (63%) the issue had been raised politely.

How Was the Issue Raised?



Polite, direct approaches worked well when neighbours got on with each other, but when relations were poor could lead to an angry confrontation.

"She's quite okay about it but did say 'do you realise the children were banging on the wall at 7am?'"

Just Having Fun Segment

"I was having a party, the next door neighbour came round and had a go at me, threatened me. She said it was my attitude towards it all -then she said 'you'd better shut up or I'll punch you.'"

Persecuted Segment

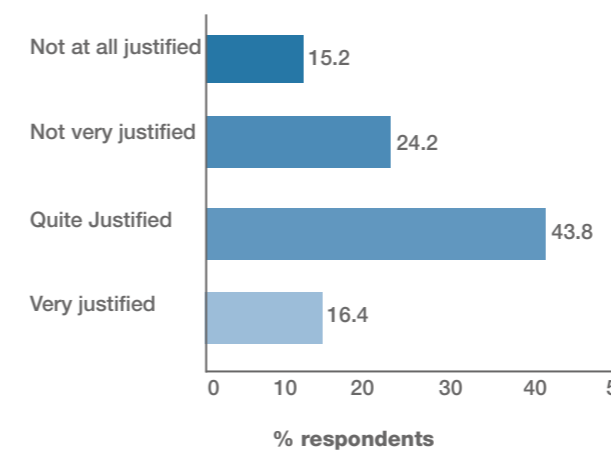
Oblique approaches were often used when neighbours did not know each other very well but could be confusing at best and at worst, treated with contempt.

"He doesn't tell me, sometimes he says I hear people next door but it's nice to hear there's someone in. I don't know if he's being polite or not."

What's Aloud Segment

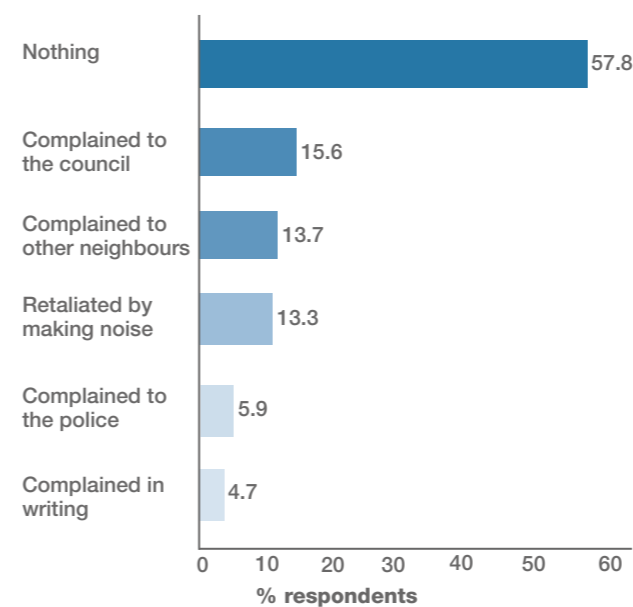
The majority of those people who had received a complaint from their neighbour felt that it was justified (60%).

How Justified Was The Complaint?



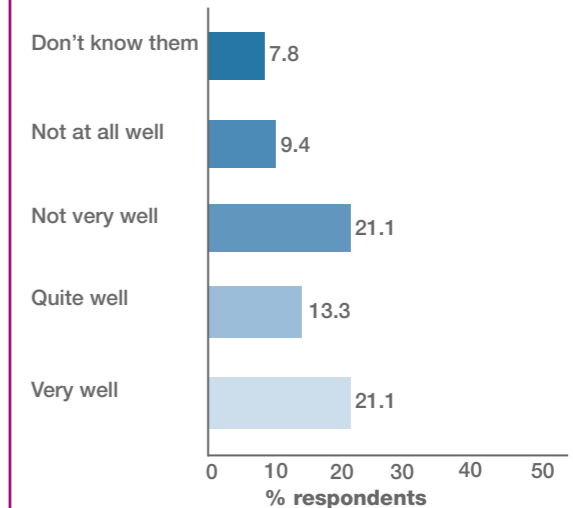
In over half of the cases where a noise maker received a complaint from their neighbours there was no follow-up, but over 20% complained formally to the council or to the police.

Neighbours Follow-up

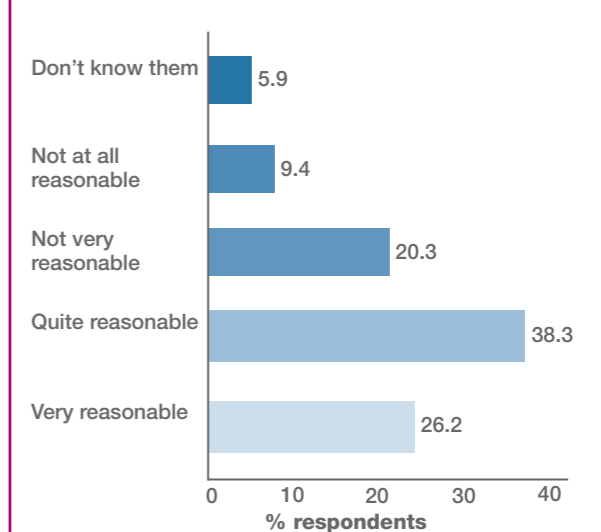


At the time the complaint was made, noise makers felt that they got on well with their neighbours (62%) and that they were reasonable people (65%).

Relationships With Neighbours

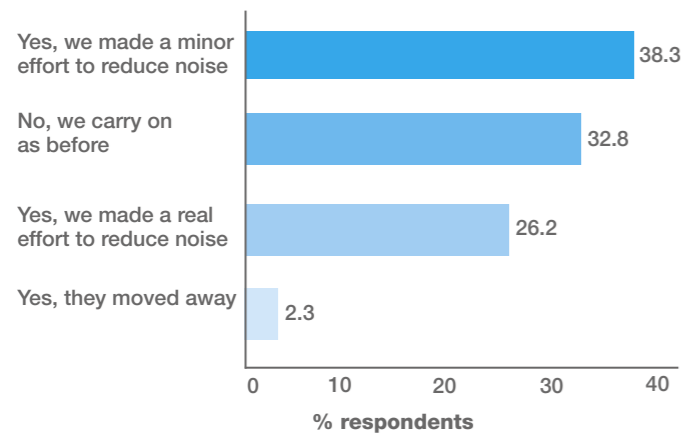


Relationships With Neighbours



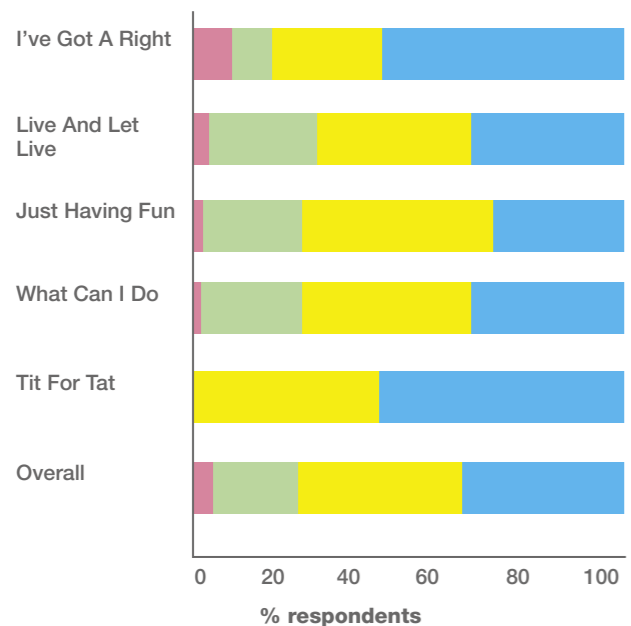
After the complaint was made, the majority of people (71%) made either a minor or no attempt to reduce their noise.

Resolution Of The Issue



I've Got A Right and Tit For Tat were the segments least likely to make any attempt to change their behaviour, whereas Live And Let Live, Just Having Fun and What Can I Do made some effort to change.

Resolution Of The Issue



- Yes - they moved away
- Yes - we made a real effort to reduce the noise
- Yes - we made a minor effort to reduce the noise
- No - we carry on as before

How noise makers responded to their neighbour's complaint about their noise depended on a number of factors such as how reasonable the request was and the demeanour of the person. Reasonable requests reasonably explained in the context of a good neighbourly relationship were likely to receive a positive response. Unreasonable requests delivered in an unfriendly or hostile manner outside the context of a good neighbourly relationship were likely to be ignored or to make the problem worse.

"It depends how legitimate the complaint was. If I'm being noisy, but it's 9.30 in the evening, I'm sorry I'm going to listen to my music."

What's Aloud Segment

"If someone says 'I'm really sorry but my little boy is not well. Is there any chance you could turn it down', you would. If they said 'turn the music down or I will call the police', you'll turn it up."

Just Having Fun Segment

Noise makers readily admitted that when responding to a neighbour's complaint they were often insincere and any change to their behaviour was short-lived.

"I find myself being really nice to her when she comes out. I'm like, 'no problem I'll sort it out, I'll deal with it, don't you worry'. And I think, you silly old bat."

Persecuted Segment

"My daughter turns it down, half hour later it goes up again."

Just Having Fun Segment

3.5 How Should The Problem Be Dealt With In The Future?

Noise makers overwhelmingly wanted their neighbours to approach them directly, rather than through a third party, about any noise they were making and to do so early to prevent the problem from escalating.

"There's a way of telling people, you don't belittle them, there's a way of talking to people."

What's Aloud Segment

"If they took it upon themselves to call the police I would get really angry at that."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40

"I've still never forgiven that woman who did that to me."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40

In spite of this, the barriers to making a successful complaint were considerable. Even if a complaint was made in a polite and unemotional manner, there were still people who would find it unacceptable. Furthermore, the natural British reserve and the habit of keeping your neighbours at arms length could make the problem difficult to deal with when it occurred.

A variety of approaches to dealing with the problem of neighbour noise were believed to be necessary. Especially popular approaches were those that encouraged dialogue between neighbours; that encouraged noise makers and noise sufferers to see things from each others' point of view; or that raised awareness about the resources available for noise sufferers and the consequences of their behaviour for makers.

"Something to encourage you to communicate with your neighbour first directly, then if it fails, official complaints route."

What's Aloud Segment

"Do it progressively starting at one and working through it. The first is non-confrontational, have a chat about it, say 'am I making too much noise?' Then to make people aware of what could happen if they carry on. Then trying your conscience, make people aware of what it is like."

Just Having Fun Segment

"A mixture of them all. Then you're addressing every single angle, people might think a bit more about it."

Tit For Tat Segment

"I think that's nice, it's making a point to say that's what could be happening to your neighbour without you actually being aware you could be doing that."

Persecuted Segment

3.6 It's Not Just Noise That Matters

Although the amount of noise people made determined whether it affected their neighbours, other factors exacerbated the problem such as the physical environment, the neighbourhood mix and changing lifestyles

The absence of adequate sound insulation in many properties, for example, especially flats, meant that normal noises created by day-to-day living could be heard by neighbours.

"The flat's walls are quite thin so I can hear him coughing next door or snoring. I just turn the TV up louder."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40 years

High density housing also meant that people were never very far away from each other, particularly outdoors.

"It's difficult if you're in your garden, you're going to hear people talking and they're going to hear you."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40 years

What type of people lived next to each other also made a difference. Problems were likely to occur if young singles and couples lived near older residents, and 'empty nesters' lived near families. Shift workers also experienced problems with 'normal' daytime noises, while those with teenagers tended to be the most tolerant of all.

"Next door is an old couple and they're quite disapproving of us being young."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

Changing lifestyles over the past twenty years have also compounded the problem: children play closer to home due to concerns about their safety; later licensing means that nights out for young people may not end until the early hours of the morning; home entertainment systems have become more sophisticated; two-earner householders mean that barking dogs are left alone all day; and there is increased interest in DIY and home improvements amongst the general public.

"I'd rather my kids were in the garden making noise than down the street where I can't see them."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

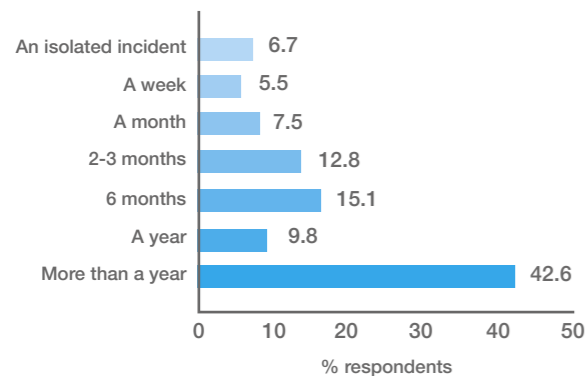
4. Noise Sufferers

Forty-three percent of the adult population have been bothered by noise from their neighbours in the past 12 months. This section looks at noise sufferers in detail.

4.1 Amount And Type Of Noise

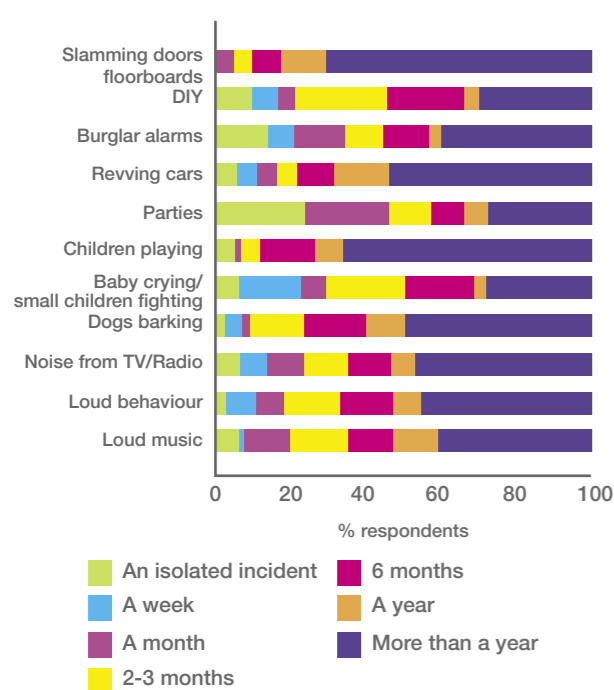
Of those people who were bothered by their neighbour's noise, just over half (52.4%) had been dealing with the problem for a year or more.

Duration Of The Problem

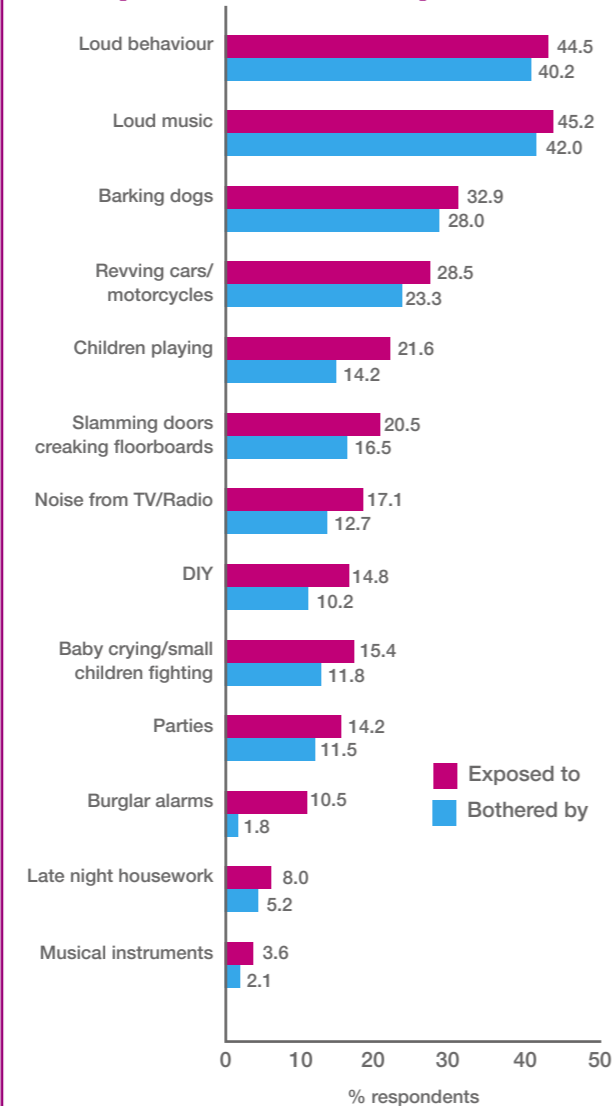


Long-term problems tended to involve loud music, loud behaviour, barking dogs and revving cars, whereas noisy parties were isolated incidents.

Duration Of The Problem



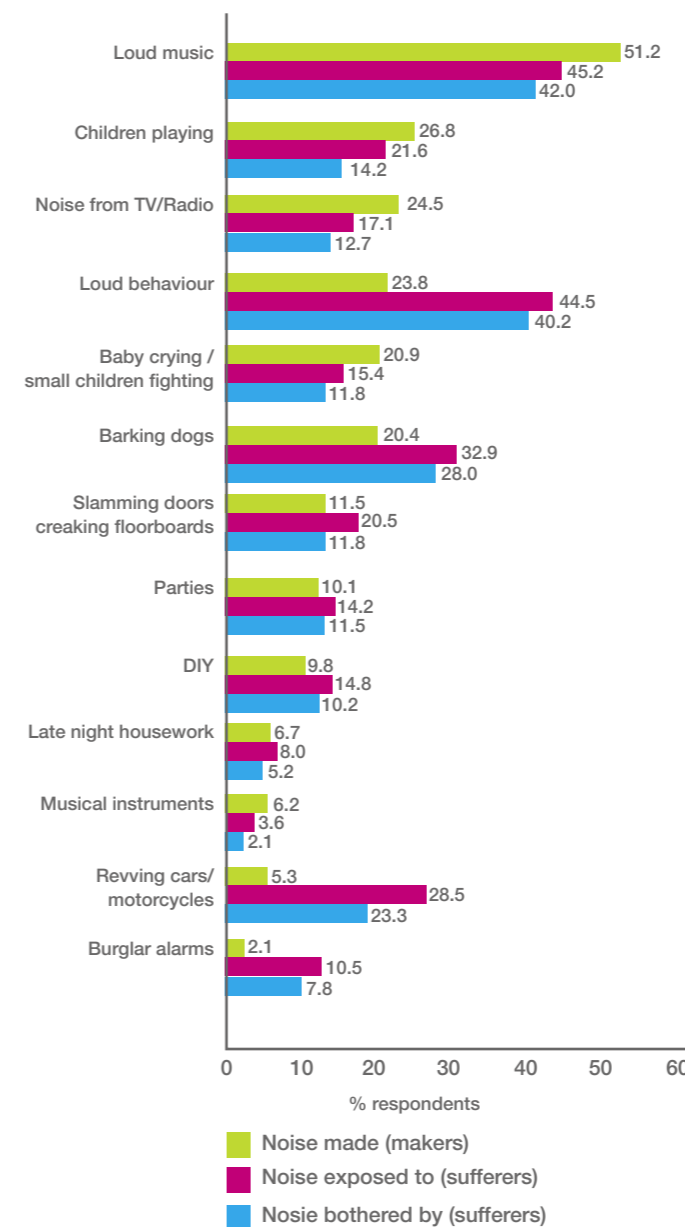
Noise Exposed To And Bothered By



The noises that people noticed most often and were most bothered by were loud music and loud behaviour, followed by barking dogs and revving cars or motorcycles. They were not, however, with the exception of loud music, the noises people admitted to making most often. In fact, the differences between the noises people made and that others were bothered by suggests that there are some noises people are particularly sensitive to such as the sound

of revving cars, loud voices and barking dogs. Whereas there are some noises they are more tolerant of such as the TV and radio and the sound of children playing.

Noise Made, Exposed To And Bothered By

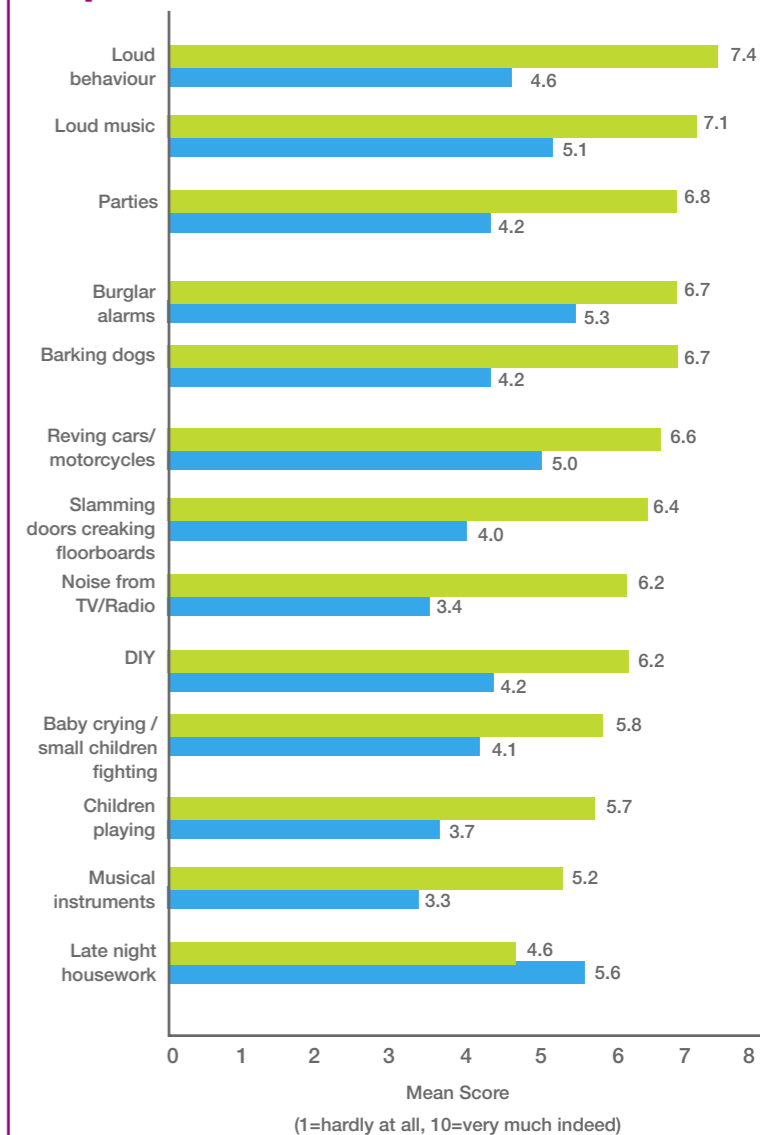


Unsurprisingly, sufferers were much more affected by all types of noise than the people who made it believed they would be.

When asked to rate how much they were affected by different types of noise on a ten-point scale (where 1 = affects me hardly at all and 10 = affects me very much indeed), scores ranged from 4.6 to 7.4. When makers were asked to rate the same types of noise on a ten-point scale according to how much they

affected their neighbours the range of scores was much narrower and occupied the lower end of the scale (i.e. 3.3 to 5.6).

Comparison Of How Much Affected



The research also found that people did not suffer with one type of noise in isolation. Rather noises tend to co-occur or were part of a much bigger problem.

"We have a weird woman that lives across the road that cuts her grass at 5.30am in the morning... she has a burglar alarm on her house, it goes off continually because she won't let her kids in, it's horrendous. The house next door to them, she's always having parties."

Ethnographic Interviews

4.2 How Do Noise Sufferers Feel?

Noise sufferers felt frustrated, angry, tense, sad and despondent. In some cases they felt overwhelmed and ready to explode.

"Just let me sleep, I'll get a migraine."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

"It will get to the point of I've had enough now."

Ethnographic Interviews

Many even expressed feelings of violence and aggression towards their noisy neighbours, while some felt afraid.

"Punching the wall."

I Want To Do Something Segment

"I'm like a mouse, cornered by a cat."

The Vigilante Segment

4.3 What Do Noise Sufferers Think About Noise Makers?

People expressed a range of opinions about their noisy neighbours. Some thought their neighbours were oblivious to the affect of their loud behaviour, whereas others accused their neighbours of deliberately making noise to upset them.

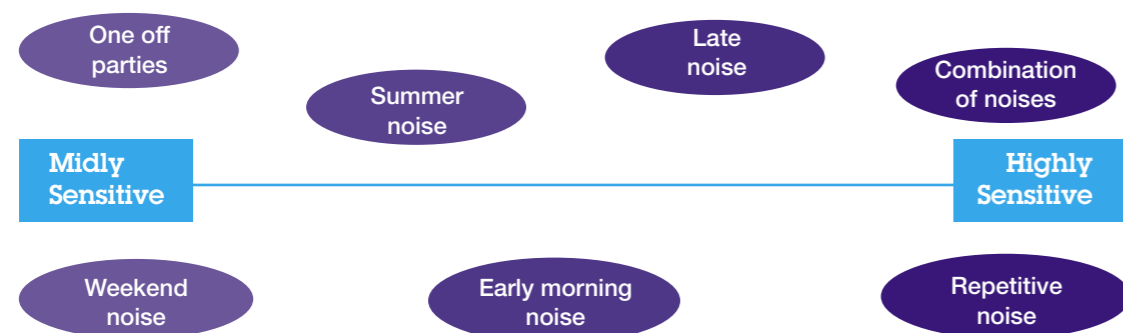
"Just inconsiderate, not making noise maliciously, just don't realise what they are doing."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

"They must know, surely everyone knows that you can't play music, not at that late time."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40 years

Sensitivity to Noise



4.4 Are Any Types Of Noise Acceptable?

Some types of noise were considered to be more acceptable than others. Background music; the television and the radio; one-off parties or DIY; pre-warned parties or DIY; and babies crying were all tolerated up to a point.

"In a perfect world you wouldn't hear anything, but in a semi or a flat you hear people's noise – quiet telly noise can't be helped."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

"Crying babies, you can't really do anything about that."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

Noise at certain times of the day or year such as during the day; at summertime, Christmas and New Year; before 10pm at night; and during the school holidays was also more likely to be tolerated.

"You tolerate noise in the summertime more, I wouldn't say you accept it but you tolerate it."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

Noise did, however, become unacceptable when it prevented sleep; caused people or their children to wake up; was continuous, late at night or early in the morning; and forced people to change their behaviour to accommodate it.

"When it's like 2am you think that's totally unacceptable because you know that is not how normal people live"

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

"When it interferes with what you're doing, whatever they're doing is louder than what you're doing."

Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

4.5 Noise Sufferers In Detail

Noise sufferers shared many similar attitudes and patterns of behaviour, but they also differed from each other in a number of important respects. On this basis they were divided into six segments, each of which is described in more detail below.

Noise Sufferer segments

Want To Do Something But Don't Know What 6.4

None/Don't Know 11.2

Nothing Worked For Me 16.2

Don't Want A Drama 16.2

The Vigilante 3.1

Resigned Victim 31.1

Let's Be Reasonable 17.5

4.5.1 Resigned Victim

Resigned Victim was the biggest group of noise sufferers, comprising 31.1% of the total population.

"Nothing gets done."

Resigned Victim Segment

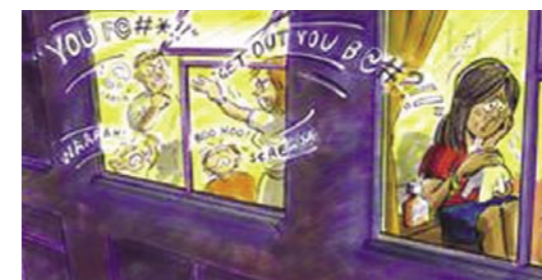
Members of this group felt that their noise problem was out of control and there was nothing that they could do about it. In a few cases, they had approached their neighbours about the noise they were making but the outcome was often negative – their neighbour was rude to them or even threatening. If members of this group were aware of formal channels to deal with neighbour noise they were cautious of using them in case it prevented them from selling their house at a later date. They welcomed measures that would inform people about the impact of their noisy behaviour on others and official intervention routes that would act on their behalf.

Members of this group either did not know their neighbours or got on reasonably well with them. They were most likely to suffer from loud music and loud behaviour and did not have any strong profile biases.

4.5.2 Let's Be Reasonable

Let's Be Reasonable along with Don't Want A Drama were the second largest group, comprising 17.5% of the total population. This group was characterised by the fact that they had a good relationship with their neighbours – the best of all the groups – and felt confident when dealing with the problem of noise. Nor were they suffering extreme hardship. They also had the most reasonable neighbours and were unlikely to take official action.

Members of this group tended to be older (i.e. 65 – 75) and lived in detached or semi-detached houses.



4.5.3 Don't Want A Drama

Members of this group (17.5%) were least likely to have done anything about their noise problem as they were afraid their neighbours would retaliate if they did. The most they had ever done was to make noise to get their own back. They welcomed interventions that informed people their noise could upset their neighbours or that would allow them to report a noisy neighbour anonymously.

Don't Want A Drama were often first-time home owners or on the lower rungs of the property ladder. They tended to live in high rise flats or terraced properties and often suffered from noisy neighbours on both sides. They didn't know their neighbours or had poor relations with them and tended to be most bothered by loud music and loud behaviour.



4.5.4 Nothing Worked For Me

Nothing Worked For Me was the third largest segment comprising 16.2% of the noise suffering population.

"I just want to keep quiet and sell, move on."

Nothing Worked For Me Segment

They had done more than any other segment to try and solve their noise problem, but the more they tried the worse the problem got. As a result they had a very poor opinion of the system to deal with noise and solutions designed to help sufferers. They felt angry and frustrated and were most likely to think that their neighbour's noisy behaviour was deliberate.

Nothing Worked For Me had the worst relationship with their neighbours and were most likely to live in the South.



4.5.5 Want To Do Something But Don't Know What?

This segment was the second smallest comprising 6.4% of the noise suffering population.

"Rather than confronting a neighbour if you did it through the proper channels you stand a better chance."

Want To Do Something Segment

They were often suffering from extreme noise disturbance that was part of a bigger dispute with their neighbours involving, for example, parking. Members of this group had tried a few approaches to dealing with their problem such as talking to their neighbours or ringing environmental health, but like Nothing Worked for Me, members of this group had not received the help they needed to solve their problem. They were very frustrated and waiting for something to be offered to them that would solve their problem once and for all. They welcomed the idea of a campaign and saw noise makers as thoughtless and selfish.

This segment tended to be younger (i.e. 18 – 24) and lived in the South East.



4.5.6 The Vigilante

The Vigilante was the smallest group comprising 3.1% of the total noise suffering population.

"One day I'll blow."

The Vigilante Segment

Members of this group felt a great deal of anger and frustration towards their neighbours who they thought were making noise deliberately and hence any dialogue with them would be futile. They blamed poor parenting or upbringing for the noise makers' behaviour, who they viewed as people with no manners or social skills. They saw themselves as decent people, not responsible for noise and were waiting for the system to support them. However, they felt that the law fell on side of the noise maker so was likely to be ineffective in helping them to solve their problem.

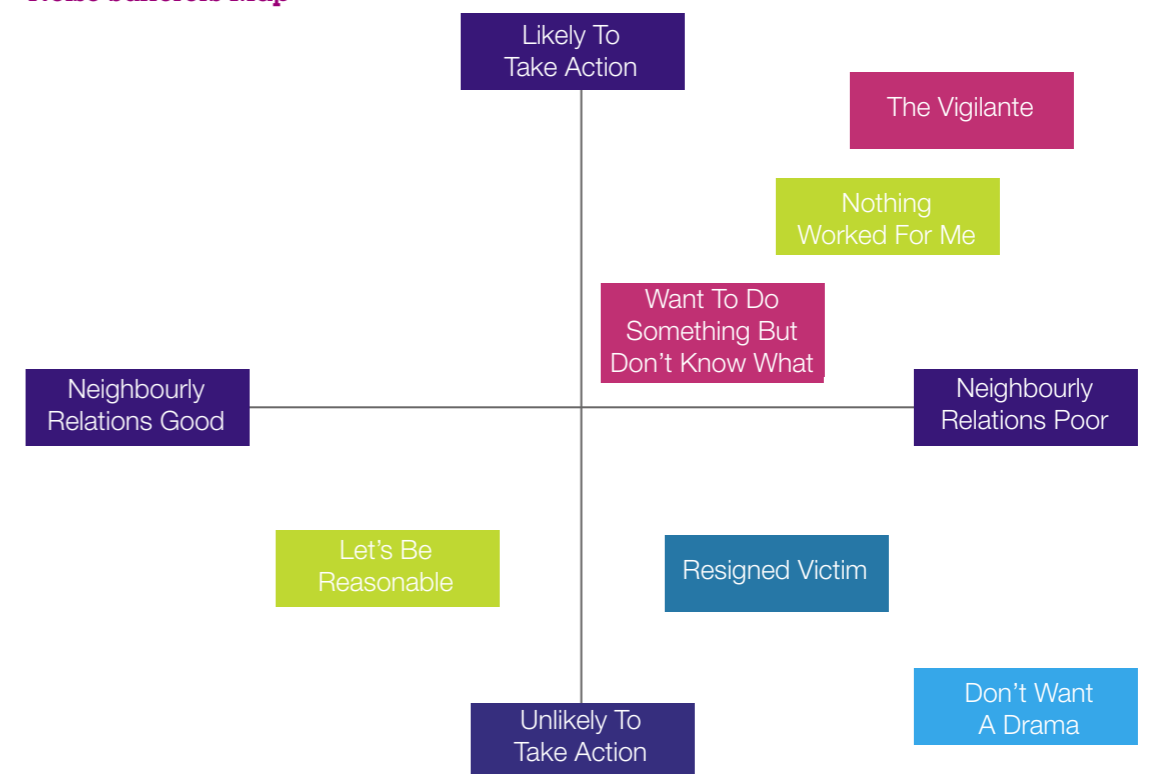


Members of this group were more likely to be 35 – 54, and tended to live in low-rise flats in the North.

4.5.7 Segment Mapping

Based on the above analysis, it was possible to map the segments on two dimensions: relationship with neighbours and likeliness to take action. This revealed that there were no groups likely to take action in the context of a good neighbourly relationship. Rather most people had a poor relationship with their neighbours and were likely to take action in this context (i.e. The Vigilante, Nothing Worked For Me, Want To Do Something But Don't Know What) or were too afraid or unwilling to (i.e. Resigned Victim, Don't Want A Drama). Let's Be Reasonable was an unusual segment in that this was the only group to have a good relationship with their neighbours.

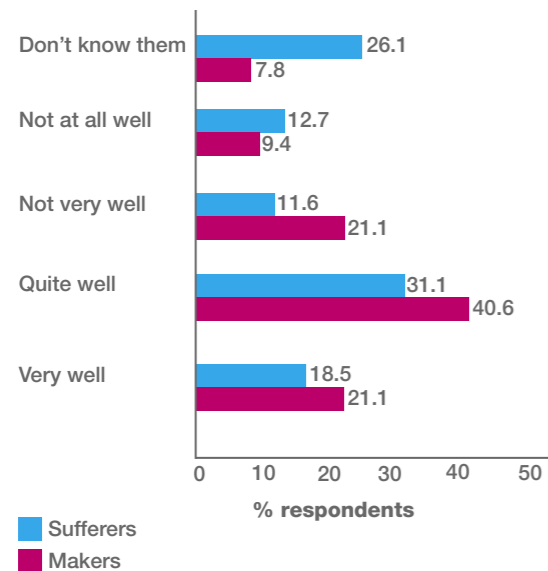
Noise Sufferers Map



4.6 How Has The Problem Been Dealt With In The Past?

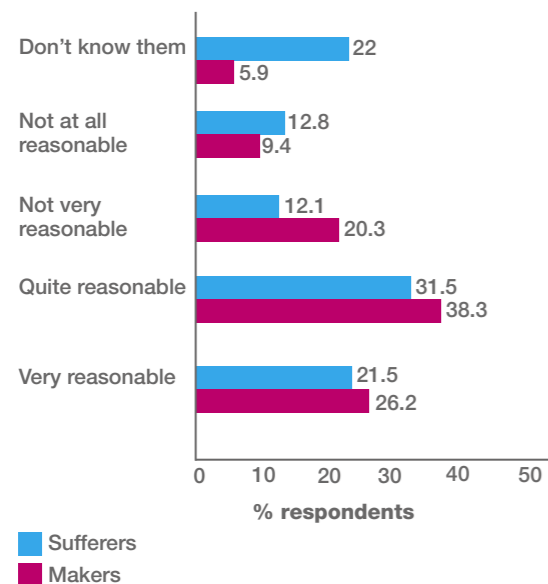
Noise makers had a better relationship with their neighbours than noise sufferers. Half of all noise sufferers (50.4%) did not know their neighbours. In contrast, only 38.3% of noise makers did not know their neighbours.

Relationship With Neighbours



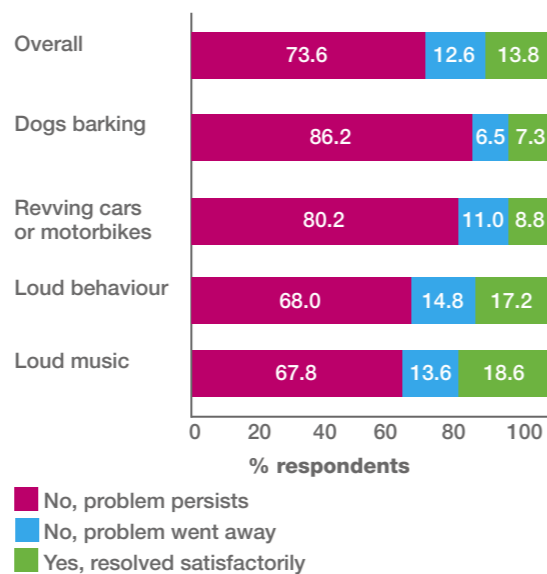
Noise makers were also more likely to think their neighbours were reasonable people than noise sufferers (64.4% versus 53.1%).

Relationship With Neighbours



For the majority of noise sufferers (73.6%) their problem had not been resolved. Problems with barking dogs were especially persistent.

Resolution Of Problems



One reason why problems often persisted was because the barriers to making a complaint were considerable. Noise sufferers were afraid of upsetting the status quo, they were afraid their neighbours would retaliate if they did complain; or that it would make it difficult to sell their house at some point in the future; or the problem would only worsen.

"It's difficult because the mum is a lovely person, I don't want to rock the boat with her."

The Vigilante Segment

"You see these programmes... 'Neighbours From Hell' and you don't want to push it in case."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40 years

The tipping point to making a complaint was often when the situation became unbearable: there was no respite from the noise; sufferers felt their lives were being controlled by it; or it was being deliberately aimed at them.

"If it was all the time, you couldn't go to sleep and it drove you crazy."

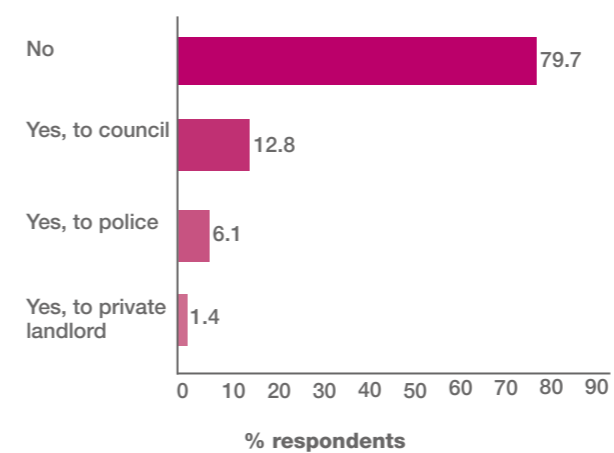
Home Privately Owned or Rented From Council, 21 – 40 years

"It's like they are in control of our lives... I don't know how much more to take."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40 years

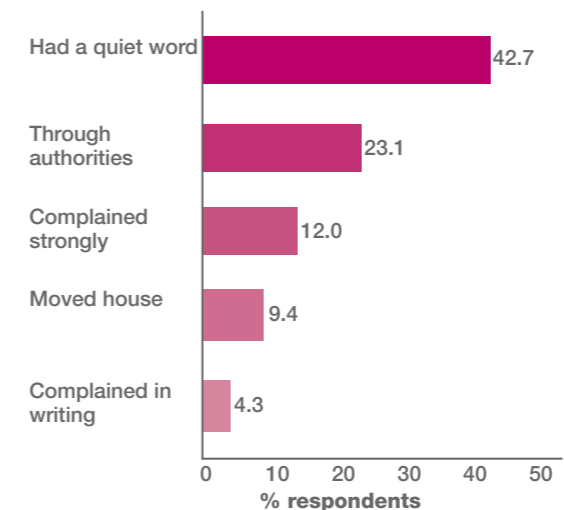
Amongst those sufferers who had not resolved their noise problem, only one in five (20.3%) had formally reported their neighbours: to a private landlord, the police or the council.

Reporting Of Issues



For the few who had managed to resolve their noise problem, most had a quiet word with their neighbours (42.7%), although close to a quarter (23.1%) had gone to the authorities and nearly one in ten (9.4%) had moved house.

Resolution Of The Issue



Awareness of official complaint routes was generally high amongst noise sufferers. Most knew that they could contact their council's environmental health department. However, most were put off from doing so by the need to collect evidence should they wish to take their case further. Some noise sufferers had even been told by their council not to expect too much. Noise sufferers also knew that they could contact the police but didn't think that they would be much help.

"Too much hassle, a load of paperwork, phone calls to make and things to send off, not bothered to do all that."

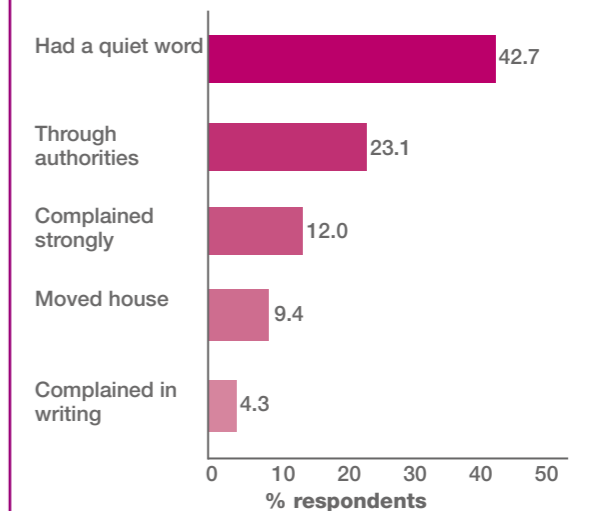
Private / Council, 21 – 40 years

"When I was younger, if there was a party you could phone the police and they'd come and say 'can you turn it down' – they don't have time to do that anymore."

Home Owned With Mortgage, 21 – 40 years

Often noise sufferers did not complain but they did retaliate by making their own noise. Seventeen percent of noise sufferers admitted to doing this and the most common form of noise was playing loud music and/or turning up the TV or radio.

Resolution Of The Issue



In those cases where noise sufferers had taken direct action, the problem either got better for a little while and then reverted to what it had been; the problem simply continued as it had been; or the problem got worse. There were no examples in this research where action had led to a positive outcome for the sufferer.

"I've had a quiet word about their music and it stops – but the next time it's exactly the same."

Resigned Victim Segment

"A subtle word did nothing... when it's bad now I put earplugs in."

The Vigilante Segment

"They started complaining that our dog was barking – and we don't even have a dog."

Don't Want A Drama Segment

5. Conclusions

4.8 How Should The Problem Be Dealt With In The Future?

There was no single approach to dealing with neighbour noise that sufferers favoured. What approach they thought might work depended on a number of factors such as how bad the problem was; how long it had been going on for; the type of noise; what had been done about it so far; the time of day the noise occurred; the duration of noise; sufferers relationship with neighbour; and noise sensitivity.

Generally though, noise sufferers preferred indirect methods to dealing with their problem. They wanted something that would stop the noise from happening in the first place or someone to act on their behalf. They didn't like any approach that would force them to take action. For this reason a warden was the most popular solution because it was someone dealing with the problem on their behalf, it could be anonymous and the results could be immediate.

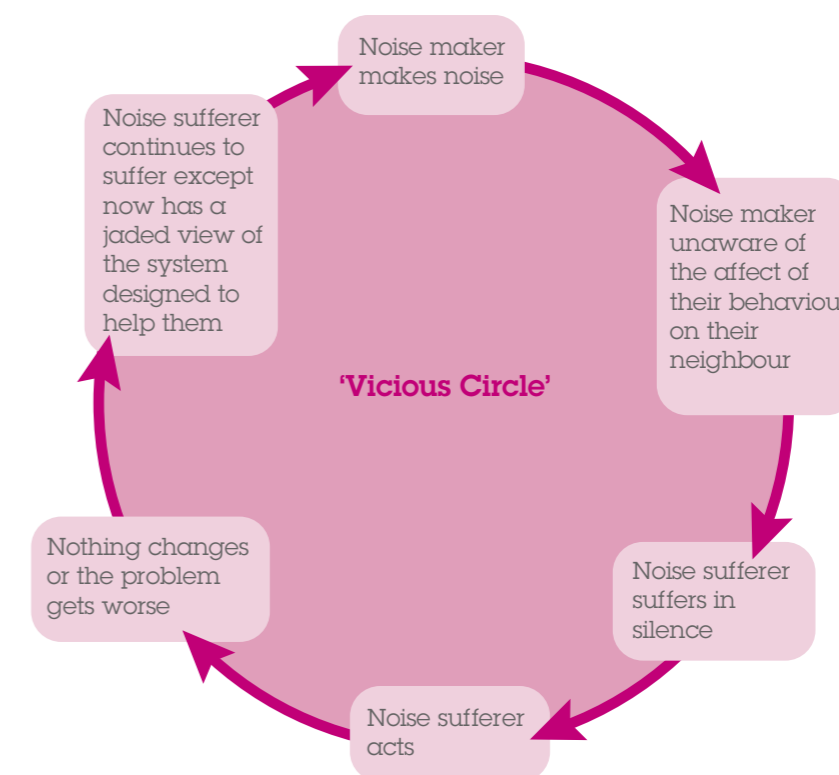
Noise sufferers did not want to talk to their neighbours. Resigned Victim and Don't Want A Drama were especially cautious. The other groups were willing to try provided that there were teeth to back any dialogue up (Nothing Worked For Me) and they had reassurance that it would work.

All groups needed information about the official complaints route.

The research described in this report has demonstrated that neighbour noise is a significant part of modern life.

Just over one-third of the adult population admitted to making noise that affected their neighbours, while nearly half of people reported being affected by noise in their homes. Noise making and noise suffering also had a strong life stage component with noise makers most likely to be younger, pre-family or with a young family, while noise sufferers typically belonged to older households without any children.

The pattern of noise suffering and noise making uncovered by this research resembled a vicious cycle, which can make arriving at a successful solution that will satisfy both parties extremely difficult. When people made noise they were often unaware of the extent to which it affected their neighbours, or if they were aware chose to ignore it. In this study, noise makers consistently rated each of 13 noises as having less affect on their neighbours than their neighbours rated the same noises as having on them.



In many cases, noise sufferers were really suffering. Neighbour noise made them feel angry, tense, frustrated, sad and desperate. In over two-thirds of cases the problem had been going on for six months or more. In just under half of cases it had been present for a year or more. Resigned Victim was the most despairing segment and at 31.1% of the total noise suffering population also the biggest group. Furthermore, noise sufferers often experienced more than one type of noise, and problems were often part of a bigger dispute with neighbours and other quality of life issues.

The noise makers who took part in this research said that they wanted their neighbours to talk to them directly about their loud behaviour, and to do so early before the problem escalated. Noise sufferers, on the other hand, were reluctant to talk to their neighbours and preferred solutions to their problem that would allow them to report noisy neighbours anonymously or had someone else, such as a warden, act on their behalf.

The solution, though, wasn't quite as simple as early, direct intervention. Noise makers admitted that they were often insincere when they promised neighbours to reduce their loud behaviour, while attempts by noise sufferers to deal with their problem had never had a positive outcome feeding the cycle of recrimination, selfishness and helplessness.

Finally, it's not just noise that mattered. Other factors made the problem worse such as poor insulation, high density housing meant people were never very far from other people, mixed neighbourhoods with people with different lifestyles and at different life stages all living together.

These findings reveal that neighbour noise is a complex problem that does not have a single solution. Noise makers and sufferers are two very different groups of people. What would work for noise makers – early, direct intervention in the context of a good neighbourly relationship – would be unlikely to work for the majority of sufferers who want someone else to act on their behalf, will often suffer in silence and may feel that they don't know their neighbours.

For these reasons, ENCAMS decided to adopt a multi-pronged approach when campaigning about neighbour noise. Through our campaign we targeted two segments, one noise maker and one noise sufferer, both of whom we believed would be most likely to change their behaviour. We offered these groups a range of different solutions to facilitate that process including a national campaign, a website with practical information and guidance, a helpline and leaflet.

We would recommend this approach to any body such as a local authority or housing association trying to deal with the problem of neighbourhood noise: target specific groups and design solutions around their characteristics and needs.

Despite the differences between noise sufferers and makers we were, however, able to stress one underlying message through our campaign and that was the need to have a good relationship between neighbours. Not only can this stop problems from happening in the first place; it can make them easier to deal with when they do occur.

Just over one-third of the adult population admitted to making noise that affected their neighbours, while nearly half of people reported being affected by noise in their homes.

	Noise Makers	Noise Sufferers
Percentage of the population	36%	43%
Demographics	Young, pre-family or family.	Older households with no children.
Noise made/ affected by	Loud music.	Loud music, loud behaviour, barking dogs, revving cars and motorcycles.
Does noise affect their neighbours/ how does noise affect them	Don't believe the noise they make affects their neighbours.	More than half have been dealing with the problem for a year or more. They are much more affected by all types of noise than their neighbours think. They feel frustrated, tense, angry and depressed.
See themselves/ see their neighbours	See themselves as reasonable people.	See their neighbours either as oblivious to the noise they make or as making noise deliberately.
Number of segments	5	6
Relationships with their neighbours	Got on well with them.	Don't know them.
How they want the problem dealt with	They want their neighbours to approach them directly about the problem, to do so politely and early before it escalates.	They are afraid to complain. There are too many barriers. They want somebody else to act on their behalf.



Using the market research described in this report, ENCAMS undertook a neighbour noise campaign in July 2006. This was the first ever national neighbour noise campaign and we wanted to maximise our chances of success. We did this by targeting our campaign at those groups who were most likely to talk to their neighbours about the noise problem, or change their behaviour.

Among noise sufferers, the main focus of the campaign was the Don't Want A Drama segment who had to be encouraged to talk to their neighbours early on before the problem escalated. Noise makers, particularly the Live And Let Live segment were also targeted by simply attempting to raise awareness about how much noise they actually made.

The campaign consisted of a website (www.noiseconcern.org) to which the public were directed by a radio and outdoor media campaign. The site gave practical advice about how to approach noisy neighbours and although the emphasis was on early intervention, there was also information about how to take legal action against persistent offenders. For noise makers there was advice on how to reduce their noise.

The website linked to other key agencies such as Mediation UK, The Noise Abatement Society, UK Noise Association and the National Society of Clean Air.

Supporting leaflets were produced and distributed to key agencies such as doctor surgeries, libraries, police stations and Citizens Advice Bureaus, while a dedicated hotline was set up during the campaign period to deal with any queries from the public.

The campaign achieved national media coverage and over a three-week period 7,362 unique users visited the Noise Concern website; 4,515 Defra 'Bothered by Noise' leaflets were sent out to members of the public; and the Noise Concern help line received an average of 15–20 calls per day.

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- 11 Skinner, C.J. & Grimwood, C.J. (2002). The UK National Noise Incidence Study 2000/2001. BRE.
- 12 <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/statistics/noise/kf/nskf01.htm>
- 13 Source: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/statistics/noise/kf/nskf01.htm>
- 14 Grimwood, C. & Ling, M. Domestic noise complaints. 1999. BRE.
- 15 Neighbour noise: Public opinion research to assess its nature, extent and significance. MORI. 2003.
- 16 For a general history of market segmentation see: People Who Litter. 2007. ENCAMS.
- 17 See page 34.

Useful Links

Helpful Information on Neighbour Noise

Noise and Nuisance information
www.defra.gov.uk/environment/noise/suffer/

Mediation UK - Advice on neighbour mediation
www.mediationuk.org.uk

Noise Net – Information on sound proofing your home
www.noisenet.org

Noise Action Groups

Noise Abatement Society
www.noiseabatementssociety.com

The Noise Network – The community code
www.noisenetwork.org.uk

National Society for Clean Air and Environmental Protection
www.nasca.org.uk

UK Noise Association
www.ukna.org.uk

Other Useful Links

Defra (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)
www.defra.gov.uk

ENCAMS (the charity responsible for the noise concern campaign)
www.encams.org

The Dogs Trust
www.dogstrust.org.uk

