

# Week of action wins through

Despite much uncertainty, organisations were still able to put on a show for Noise Action Week. Lis Stedman reports.



Noise Action Week faced a challenging national start this year, with the major restructuring of Epuk that has left it as a semi-voluntary organisation with a diminished presence and effectively no budget.

Right up to the last few weeks it was unclear whether there'd be any money to carry out coordination and marketing. A late all clear was given to modest funding and some success was salvaged from a potential disaster. For many, Noise Action Week is the one and only opportunity to focus on noise, gather some publicity and try and put across positive encouragement rather than just struggling to keep up with statutory enforcement. Its only peer is the Noise Abatement Society John Connell awards – and those are now being paused (see news page one).

Of course it is not just Epuk's difficulties that have hindered Noise Action Week – Epuk's near-collapse is a sign of the times and merely reflects what is happening among all those that traditionally take part in the week. Local authorities are being squeezed by 8% a year and environmental health budgets are an easy target.

Lobbying groups that have in the past supported Noise Action Week have got their own problems, for instance, the British Tinnitus Association noted that it supports the aims of the week "but we don't do particular events at the moment, we simply don't have the resources".

Epuk noise committee head Alan Bratt explained that one of the main issues was that the decision to run the event was taken a lot later than normal, largely because of the major changes at Epuk. "We are usually thinking about what to do at the end of the preceding summer," he noted. "We really weren't sure if we would have sufficient funding to run it in any meaningful way so we started a lot later, so what we did we were quite pleased with."

There were a number of technical issues due to the change in administrative structure as Epuk moved to a voluntary basis, which meant that things did not go as smoothly as perhaps the organisation would have liked.

Nevertheless, Bratt said: "All things considered, though we cast the notification net a bit narrower of necessity, we were pleased with the result. As Epuk, it was important for us to get this off the ground and let the environmental protection community know we were alive and kicking."

Ultimately, Epuk was fortunate in securing funding from Defra, the IoA, CIEH and commercial partners such as Bruel & Kjaer, as well as donations from a number of local authorities. However, the Defra funding is unlikely to be available next year. Despite this, Bratt remains confident and believes other sources of funding will come into play. "Next year we will very much be focusing on social housing providers, and obtaining funding from as many as we can persuade. We are hoping that if the membership in a wider sense holds up we can commit more to it."

In addition, local authorities that assumed Epuk was a spent force are now realising that the organisation is still active and are coming back on board, he explained. "It is well recognised by government as having value because of the community that forms its parts," he noted. "The membership contains a large percentage of local authorities, but we have always had commercial members who have been supportive, as well as academics and universities. Epuk has always been a broad church where you get a wide debate about

issues."

The volunteer staff and past Epuk stalwarts, notably Mary Stevens, have played a vital role in ensuring the survival of both the organisation and Noise Action Week. On both counts, Bratt says, the response has been very pleasing. And he adds: "If we are having this conversation this time next year I hope to be able to report that we were better prepared and pre-planned."

These challenges meant that the internet proved an invaluable resource – once again, Noise Action Week employed a Twitter feed, which was full of useful information, and also a Facebook page that listed links to interesting and amusing snippets of news such as an €3000 fine in Spain for slapping down dominoes, German research showing hyperactivity is linked to high traffic noise, as well as reports of quiet roads made from recycled tyres and of a Fleetwood resident losing their noisy sound equipment, to highlight a few.

For individual councils that are committed to the week, knowing the dates, made sure that Epuk's valiant efforts were reflected on the ground. **Wiltshire Council** led with a message "don't be a dummy and damage your hearing" – the environmental health team set up dummy heads as part of a special display at County Hall, with visitors being invited to turn a set of headphones on at the usual volume they used to listen to music and then transfer the

headset to the artificial heads. These turned out to be more than just shop dummies – the heads were able to display the decibel level from the headphones, and information on the impact this would have on hearing.

There was also a large display of confiscated electronics, including speakers and TVs. Keith Humphries, cabinet member for public health and protection, said: "Noise from domestic entertainment, such as stereos, radios and televisions, is the biggest cause of complaints between neighbours. It is behaviour which can cause distress, loss of sleep and even illness. It can drive people to despair, but people do not need



Elmbridge has always been a keen supporter of Noise Action Week



to endure this and our teams do take action where necessary.”

One of the most notable activities of the week involved students at Isle of Sheppey Academy, who made an entertaining short film with **Swale BC** about reducing neighbourhood noise that can be found on *YouTube*. It is a humorous look at the sorts of noises that annoy and reminds people to be “mindful and be neighbourly”. It also provides good information about how and why complaints can be made and the actions that can be taken.

Led by the Academy’s head of media Karen Gray, the students created a range of scenarios to highlight the issue of tackling nuisance noise and the impact on the community. The students, between 14 and 18 years old, injected some fun into their roles through the use of musical instruments, car mechanics and of course, their own individual artistic approaches.

Swale’s cabinet member for environment and rural affairs, councillor David Simmons said: “The effects of noise pollution can be devastating, but on some occasions can be resolved simply by communicating with our neighbours. We wanted to raise the awareness of both elements and working with the academy, I hope we have achieved just that.

“The students have worked very hard to get those messages across in a fun but captivating way. We are all grateful for all they’ve put into the short film and I hope we can work with them again in the near future.”

**Daventry DC** offered shoppers tea and conversation to discuss noise problems. Enforcement officers from Daventry District Council’s environmental health team set up a gazebo in the town centre offering advice and support on tackling noise pollution. People were able to chat to officers about the steps they could take to reduce the noise they make, and were given information on contacts for noise concerns. Visitors were also able to admire the team’s noise monitoring equipment, and the dog warden was on hand to give advice about reducing noise from pets.

Environmental improvement manager Paul Knight explains that a great deal of thought went into siting the event: “We put up a gazebo at what we knew was a busy location on a market day, near a bus stop, and we must have talked to 30 or 40 people. We found a lot of preconceptions, such as people thinking they were allowed to make as much noise as they wanted till 11pm. We tried to get across what is and isn’t reasonable.”

He stresses the importance of using the week to spread messages. “None of the people we talked to knew about Noise Action Week, so it was very much an opportunity to talk about noise issues before

the situation is too far gone, as it usually is, and formal action is required.”

**Elmbridge BC** was, as usual, a keen supporter of Noise Action Week, reflecting the council’s general and much-praised enthusiasm for resolving noise issues. Principal EHO Paul Leadbeater explained that the activities involved staff from the pollution service and **Elmbridge Housing Trust** the boroughs largest social housing provider visiting the estates from where most noise complaints originate promoting their “partnership in noise” in a double-decker London bus.

Here they provided “really good tea, coffee and biscuits” as well as games for the kids so their parents could sit and chat about noise issues and antisocial behaviour. Representatives from Mediation North Surrey and the police were also on hand to provide advice, and there was a competition with a camera as a prize, he reported.

The council also made good use of Twitter, undertaking live tweeting on the Monday with **Mediation North Surrey** and about Elmbridge’s award-winning *Online Noise Toolkit* on the Tuesday. On Thursday, the team went round the borough’s pubs, clubs and bars with *Pubwatch* area chairs promoting the award-winning *Noise Code for Licensed Premises*. This was a great success, Leadbeater said, with many new premises signing up to the scheme.

Friday saw more live tweeting, this time with the police – the council introduced a new out-of-hours service in April from 8.30pm on Saturday to 3am on Sunday, in which EHOs go out in police cars responding to noise and other issues and undertaking proactive visits. Elmbridge is always building on its reputation as a leader in the fight against noise, and recently introduced a new noise app, Leadbeater added, to help people gather evidence of noise nuisance.

Again, he stressed the value of the week. “People shouldn’t have to put up with unreasonable noise, and part of our role is education, so that people are aware of what options they have.” The council’s efforts, notably in curbing noise from licensed premises, are starting to pay dividends, he added. “Noise can affect people’s lives,” he noted. “But it is often overlooked – it can drop off the radar.”

**Ipswich BC** held what sounds like a very enjoyable event on 24 May. Spokesman Simon Manning explained that the council held a fun day on one of its estates. “There’s a play area that has been recently renovated and our

environmental protection team ran a competition. They took out a microphone and decibel counter, and found the loudest adult, kid and dog. It seemed to go down well, especially with the kids. We also gave out advice on how to limit noise, and the police were there too.”

To tempt people further, the team held a barbecue with kids’ entertainment, and another popular draw was a member of the dog team, who explained to people how to keep their pets quiet while they were out, and provided free microchipping. Despite a wet start, the day proved a success, Manning added. “As the kids came out of school we found we were really busy, and the people who came along seemed to enjoy it.”

He stressed that Noise Action Week works well with the council’s proactive approach to noise issues, and luckily one of the tenant panels was willing to provide the modest funding. “We were quite lucky that there was this pocket of money for tenants to spend at their discretion,” he noted. “For us, it was an opportunity to talk to tenants about issues before they are already cross. It is more of a positive way of engaging with them.”

**Maidstone BC** undertook a joint agency operation, taking its Mobile Gateway trailer round various housing association areas to provide advice on noise with partners including the housing associations and the police community safety unit. “We provided lots of advice and spoke to lots of people,” spokesman Michael Swoffer said. The events were spread across the whole week, with some days more successful than others because of the weather, he added.

Swoffer confirmed the usefulness of the week. “The local community don’t usually get this information,” he noted. At the events, the council was able to provide its seven-tier advice on what people should do if affected by noise issues in the form of scroll pens and fridge magnets. He added:

● continued overleaf



**Daventry’s team takes the message to the people**





**Noise Action Week** (continued from previous page)

"We feel it does make a difference, and it is reducing the number of complaints we are getting. We do feel that with events like this, that even if it helps one person it is useful."

**Merton Council's** pollution team focused on raising awareness of noise pollution around the borough by distributing information leaflets and promoting Noise Action Week on its website, a spokesperson said. The publicity aimed to give residents an opportunity to provide registered keyholder details for house alarms, get practical information on noise nuisance and sound insulation, learn about being a considerate neighbour, and get information about mediation as an alternative means of resolving complaints, the spokesperson added.

A large and enthusiastic **Thanet DC** team was at Asda in Broadstairs on 22 May, talking about its services to the community, and reported a great turn-out. A spokesperson said: "Thanet District Council officers spoke to at least 80 people during the course of the day, various enquiries from noise issues, trees, dogs, OAP assistance, air pollution, rubbish and many more. As a partnership agency with Margate Task Force, we were able to offer people leaflets and information covering many issues, as well as some freebies."

The spokesperson added: "As well as talking to customers about issues they have, and talking them through what services are available to them we also got children involved by getting them to shout 'Asda' into the sound level meter. In return they each received a blue or pink certificate and a bag of goodies. They all really enjoyed taking part."

"The manager of the Asda store mentioned how pleased he was that we were so busy and that we were offering information and services for free. A number of people who would usually not have the chance to visit the Gateway Plus, due to work or other commitments, were able to interact directly with us about noise problems in their area and it was a great way to promote the council's services."

The London boroughs of **Harrow** and **Hackney** both took part in awareness-raising activities – Hackney notes that its noise pollution team offered advice to residents of its Woodberry Down and De Beauvoir estates, and also chatted to people in the Hackney Service Centre.

Councillor Sophie Linden, Hackney's cabinet member for crime, sustainability and customer services, said: "Noise pollution can have a serious impact on people's health and wellbeing, as well as being a common cause of neighbour disputes, so the council works hard to

advise, monitor and respond to reports of excessive noise.

"It's not just about clamping down on those who are being noisy; we also work with developers to make recommendations about how to minimise noise and to ensure that everyone understands their responsibilities."

South Tyneside Council provided support through a local media campaign, giving "sound advice" to residents on keeping neighbourhood noise down and of the services available to tackle the problem. In Northern Ireland, Antrim BC says it didn't have any initiatives this year but is planning for next year. A spokesperson said: "Environmental Health say they have an excellent idea, but they didn't want to rush it for this year."

**ADR Mediation and Training, Allerdale BC and Your Derwent & Solway Housing and Home Group** worked with police and held a community event on 22 May to discuss noise issues. An Allerdale spokesperson explains that "we attended an event at the housing association to encourage people who wanted to highlight noise issues or seek advice. We were encouraging people to come forward before they get to the dispute stage".

Councillor Phil Tibble, executive member at Allerdale BC, said: "I think this was a very worthwhile event for our team to attend, meet the public and share our advice leaflets. One strong message we received was that people didn't know that they could contact us about issues like barking dogs."

"The main problems raised at the event were antisocial behaviour, which was affecting some of the elderly residents. In addition to that, lots of people have been in touch about DIY noise, particularly with regard to the times of day that people were working. We have also had a few calls about garden and barbecue parties, which are a regular occurrence during warm weather, especially at the weekends."

"Highlighting the fact it was Noise Action Week gave us a great opportunity to give advice to people we may not normally have made contact with. Promoting Noise Action Week in the local media has encouraged more people to contact us by phone and in person for advice."

**Fife Council** led the way in Scotland, highlighting its support for the week on its website, as well as its multi-partner approach, which includes Police Scotland, Mediation Services and Fife Council noise control, housing and consumer education officers. EHO Tom Weanie explained that the council undertakes noise and health workshops at schools all year round, but that those taking place during Noise Action Week provide a valuable opportunity to

explain the council's work to year 4 and year 5 pupils.

He noted that the workshops raise awareness of how we create sounds and the definition of noise, discuss how the ear works, and look in detail at how noise affects physical, mental and social health. The team brought a hand-held noise meter to allow children to make noise and understand the principles involved, and the team also took the meter into the playground to help the children to understand background noise.

"We explain what we can do, and the commonest types of noise problems," Weanie added. The highly-interactive workshops are very popular, he notes, as learning about the ear and sound are an important part of the National Curriculum for Excellence.

Noise Action Week is an important part of raising awareness of the council's work, he explained. "We really feel there is a lack of awareness of what we do, and who you can go to if you have a problem. We did a survey a couple of years ago and found a lot of people had not heard about the night-time noise team." Since then, he explains, the council has undertaken a great deal of work to publicise its services, and issues press releases during Noise Action Week to highlight them. He adds: "The whole point of Noise Action Week is to try to raise awareness of where to get help in the community" – something he feels the week

**Noise Action Week Roadshow**

**Wednesday 22 May 2013**

A double decker bus will be visiting the following addresses to promote the Partnership in noise between the Council and Elbridge Housing Trust and how this can help you deal with noise 24/7.

10:30 am to 12 noon	Houston Road, Thames Ditton
12:30 pm to 2 pm	St Johns Drive, Walton on Thames
2:30 pm to 4 pm	Vicarage Fields, Walton on Thames

Refreshments, entertainment for children  
**plus competition to win a Sony Cyber-shot WX00**

find out more at  
[www.elbridge.gov.uk/noise](http://www.elbridge.gov.uk/noise)  
 or call 01372 474750

Elbridge Borough Council  
 paragon Elbridge Housing Trust  
 ...bridging the communities...

**Eyecatching Elbridge poster**



helps to achieve.

With over 300 noise complaints each year, **East Staffs BC** advised on “avoiding the annual summer sound clash” – most of its complaints are received in summer, when windows and doors are left open and people spend more time outdoors.

The council’s website provides advice on outdoor noise, and specifics about barking dogs, friend and family “get togethers”, noise from pubs and clubs. Councillor Julia Jessel, deputy leader for regulatory services, noted: “We are all hoping to have a warm and happy summer, but, with just a little thought and forward planning, there should be no need to disturb our neighbours unreasonably. Noise Action Week allows the council to raise awareness of how different types of noise can impact on the lives of residents in East Staffordshire.”

Although the late start meant Epuk believes fewer housing associations than normal participated, Moseley and District housing and care organisation held two noise drop in clinics – experts were on hand to offer guidance on how to tackle common noise problems, and staff visited homes to remind residents about the importance of reducing noise, as well as giving out tips for preventing it.

Housing officer Peter Helly noted that “barking dogs, loud music or even people slamming doors can have a huge impact on a person’s health and wellbeing. This is why we’re holding the clinics so that residents can come and ask questions and get vital advice about resolving noise problems before they escalate”.

**Blaby DC** and **Three Oaks Homes** housing association held a noise drop-in session for people to find out how to reduce neighbour noise.

Housing association **Gloucester City Homes** (GCH) held a community roadshow for advice on dealing with noise problems, and issued a leaflet of handy hints on keeping noise levels down when holding a

party. Also during the week, the association supported **Gloucester City Council’s** environmental protection team and police in an action to seize and confiscate noise-making equipment. At the beginning of the week, GCH, Project Solace (a city anti-social behaviour scheme) and Gloucester CC’s environmental protection team were out and about knocking on residents’ doors, providing practical advice on dealing with noise nuisance.

In the commercial sector, **Pulsar Meters** provided a helpful guide on construction noise, highlighting the benefits of using sound level meters and Personal Sound Exposure meters (PSEMs), which can be downloaded from their website ([www.pulsarinstruments.com](http://www.pulsarinstruments.com)).

Summing up, action week coordinator Mary Stevens noted that “all things considered I am very pleased with the way it went”. Bearing in mind that there are always councils that don’t publicise their events on the national website or Twitter feed, it’s clear she has reason to be pleased even if, sadly, *Noise Bulletin* was unable to unearth a single example of anyone dressing in a dog suit this year!

Some have suggested that the difficulties being experienced by the UK domestic Noise Action Week should lead to renewed focus for International Noise Awareness Day. Noisedirect’s Nargis Kayani observed: “We certainly feel that International Noise Awareness Day is more appropriate because it simply seeks to raise awareness, whereas Noise Action Week suggests ‘action’ and there seems to be little ‘action’ apart from the usual day to day stuff.”

CIEH’s Howard Price robustly supports the principle of Noise Action Week, rather than shifting to support the international day. “I don’t think the international day has any impact in the UK at all. I think it’s important to tailor these things to local circumstances – that has got more value.”

He notes that there have always been questions: “Is a week too long – is a day too short? Capturing the public’s imagination is always difficult. If it is only a day, it can be overshadowed by other things, such as news events. If it is a week, it can dissipate the effort so it doesn’t hold together as a national initiative.” However, he confesses, he is not sure there is an answer, and much depends on the amount of resources that can be put behind the efforts.

He notes: “I’m quite sure they had support in spirit from Defra officials, but their resource position is well known. It’s not surprising that they don’t

commit year to year.”

He also warns that “there are hints in the revised noise policy that noise should not get in the way of business”. Ultimately, he warns: “Government needs to make up its mind. We have got a national noise policy for England – is the government really behind it or not?”

That, of course, is the key question. If government were to throw its support more firmly and evidently behind Noise Action Week, then its future would be assured. In the absence of anything resembling guidance the task for Epuk, and other committed organisations and local authorities, is to ensure the survival of an extremely useful and enjoyable annual event.

## NAW IN BRIEF

**Stirling Council** announced that it has set up a rail noise and vibration working group.

**Kettering BC** went out and about advising on how to banish noisy barking.

In Westminster, **Peabody Housing** was promoting peace and quiet for tenants.

**Merton Priory Homes** was advising tenants to be considerate neighbours.

**Vent Axia** ran a Twitter competition, the prize being a silent fan.

**Central Beds Council** announced that one in five people think they make less noise than their neighbours, and one in eight think they make more.

**Walsall Council** announced that they have created a database of intruder alarms to solve the problem of frequent complaints, and were encouraging residents to provide contact details.

**Gloucester City Homes** held a community roadshow with advice on dealing with noise problems.

**Stevenage BC** handed out free earplugs all week at its customer service centre.

**Middlesbrough** mediation service Unite focused on DIY noise advice.

**Medway DC** was offering help for vocal dogs, and highlighted the 300 complaints a year it gets on the subject.

Residential leasehold management trade body **ARMA** provided tips on dealing with noise in blocks of flats. **Somerset Council** blogged about annoying office noise.

**Nottingham Police** and **Nottingham City Council** worked together to tackle noise in the city.

**Argyll and Bute Council** issued a new guidance leaflet on neighbourhood noise, which is available from its website.



**Fife: getting school children to shout into a noise meter never fails!**