



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION

Cabinet paper: Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028

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Decision required

Cabinet is asked to:

- agree the draft Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028 (Annex B) to launch for public consultation before summer recess.
- note that the final plan will be adopted as the national strategy on soundscapes required under Part 2 of the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill in December 2023.

Summary

1. The Welsh Government has committed to consult on a new 5-year noise and soundscape plan, which would become the first statutory national strategy on soundscapes under the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill.

2. Wales is the first UK nation to legislate on soundscape management. This goes further than traditional noise control, as it considers the supportive sounds which contribute to people's well-being as well as addressing the harmful effects of unwanted noise. Good soundscape management is a vital contributor to delivering our Programme for Government objective of making our cities, towns and villages even better places in which to live and work.

3. A draft plan has been prepared at Annex B for Cabinet consideration ahead of a public consultation proposed to be launched before the summer recess. It does not make new spending commitments, focusing rather on better future decision-making, based on best available evidence and following the five ways of working in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 ("the WFG Act").

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Objective of the paper

4. This paper has been brought to Cabinet because it concerns a consultation on a plan or strategy which cuts across multiple ministerial portfolios. The consultation is expected to have a higher profile than previous ones in this subject area due to its links to the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill, which is currently undergoing scrutiny in the Senedd.

5. Definitions of terms such as “noise”, “soundscape” and “appropriate soundscape” may be found in the glossary at the back of the draft plan. The impacts of noise on health and well-being are summarised in Chapter 2.

6. The Environmental Noise (Wales) Regulations 2006 (“the 2006 Regulations”) require Welsh Ministers to produce noise action plans for major roads, major railways and large urban areas, reviewing and if necessary revising them every 5 years, starting in 2008. The 2006 Regulations do not specify in numerical terms what these plans should seek to achieve in terms of noise reduction.

7. In 2013, Welsh Ministers discharged their noise action planning obligations in the form of a single, comprehensive Noise Action Plan for Wales, which had a greater scope, both geographically and in terms of subject matter, than the specific noise action plans required by the 2006 Regulations.

8. In 2018, the Welsh Ministers replaced this with the **Noise and Soundscape Action Plan 2018-2023** (NSAP), which reframed noise policy in Wales in terms of the ways of working in the WFG Act. It resulted in Wales being recognised as the first nation to include soundscapes in national policy, and was referenced in the **United Nations Environment Programme’s Frontiers 2022 report**.

9. The 2006 Regulations place requirements on public authorities to treat the noise action plans adopted by the Welsh Ministers under those Regulations as policy. However, this expectation only extends to the specific noise sources within scope of those Regulations. Recognising the synergies between air and airborne noise pollution, the Welsh Ministers decided the Clean Air (Wales) Bill provided an opportunity to put the new Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028, including those parts not covered by the 2006 Regulations, on a statutory footing.

10. The scope of the Clean Air (Wales) Bill was therefore broadened to include noise and soundscapes, and renamed on introduction as the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill (“the Bill”). If enacted, it will require Welsh Ministers to produce an overarching national strategy on soundscapes, something we have done voluntarily since 2018 in the form of the NSAP.

11. Although some surprise has been expressed at the change of the bill’s title, initial reactions by external organisations to the inclusion of the soundscape provisions within the bill have been overwhelmingly positive.

12. The draft plan has been drafted on a cross-government basis and in collaboration with trusted external partners. When the bill is passed into legislation this Plan will serve as the first statutory national strategy on soundscapes whilst continuing to discharge our action planning obligations under the 2006 Regulations.

13. The draft Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028 retains and refines the core messages of the NSAP, which include:

- our ambition for appropriate soundscapes, meaning the right sound environment in the right place at the right time
- our commitment to embed the five ways of working in the WFG Act, and
- our commitment to join up action on noise and air quality wherever it makes sense to do so.

14. The plan covers new topics which have come to the fore within the last 5 years, such as issues around remote working, aural diversity, air source heat pumps, changes in speed limits, and fireworks. It also sets out what we have delivered over the last 5 years, including noise mitigation works completed on the trunk road network, and scoping work to ensure noise does not become a barrier in the roll-out of domestic air source heat pumps.

15. Developments in planning policy and guidance, notably the work to publish and implement the new TAN 11 and related soundscape design guidance, on which we recently consulted, are also included in the Plan, as well as updated information from our latest strategic noise maps (still to be added to the draft Plan) and the National Survey for Wales 2021-2022.

16. The draft 2023 Plan is now 81 pages in length including Annexes, a significant reduction on the 127 pages of the NSAP published in 2018 but still a sizeable document. The document serves multiple purposes. It must include all the elements required of noise action plans by the 2006 Regulations. It covers a wide range of subject matter. It contains Welsh Government policies and evidence on specific topics which Local Authorities must have regard to over the next five years when exercising functions likely to affect soundscapes in Wales.

17. There will be an opportunity to make amendments to the draft plan in the autumn ahead of its final adoption. As part of this, officials will review the structure of the document and consider whether there would be benefit in shortening its core sections and putting more of the detail into its annexes.

Impact

18. As the national soundscapes strategy under the bill, the Noise and Soundscape Plan must contain the Welsh Ministers' policies with respect to the assessment and management of soundscapes in Wales, and our policies for

assessing and reducing levels of noise pollution.

19. The plan strongly supports the Programme for Government objective to make our cities, towns and villages even better places in which to live and work. The Programme for Government included a commitment to introduce a Clean Air Act for Wales, and this now includes the national strategy on soundscapes.

20. In the current financial climate, the principal realistically achievable goal of the Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028 will be to ensure noise and soundscapes are properly considered in decision-making by public bodies over the course of the next 5 years. For the Welsh Government, this means departments identifying situations where their policies have the potential to change sound environments in ways which positively or negatively affect the health and well-being of people, and factor this into decision-making. This is consistent with the ways of working in the WFG Act, to avoid creating new noise problems, and to maximise benefits from any opportunities arising to reduce existing noise levels and promote healthier soundscapes.

21. Examples of this happening now within the Climate Change portfolio include the consideration of policy implications for noise and soundscapes by Welsh Government energy and planning officials when reviewing the permitted development rights for air source heat pumps in Wales, and by transport officials when revising Welsh Government guidance on setting local speed limits.

22. The consultation on the draft plan presents an opportunity for ministers and departments across the Welsh Government to reflect upon how policies in their areas might positively or negatively affect the well-being of people in Wales through their sound environments. For example, how sounds in the classroom affect children's learning, including those who may be particularly sensitive to noise; how sound environments affect people's ability to work from home; or how the sounds in hospital wards affect the well-being of patients and staff.

23. Welsh citizens will experience the benefits of the transition from traditional

noise control to a more inclusive soundscape-based approach when they can see public bodies in Wales taking on board local communities' views on their sound environments, in terms of both what they value and what they think needs to be improved, when exercising functions that have the potential to affect their quality of life. This will require work with professional bodies to continue over the next 5 years to embed participatory soundscape methods in specific working practices, such as helping local authorities to implement the new TAN 11 and create an expectation for good soundscape design in proposals for new developments.

24. Any actions taken under the strategy must respond to events and policy development in other areas. In 2018, the NSAP could not have predicted the lockdowns of 2020/1 and the subsequent rapid uptake of working from home. Nor was it known at that time where policy thinking would be 5 years later in relation to matters such as our Clean Air Bill, speed limits, fireworks and new technologies such as air source heat pumps. But the broad guiding principles and ways of working contained in the plan have proven valid and relevant to all those things and are expected to remain relevant over the course of the next 5 years.

25. Putting the plan on a more solid legal foundation as the national soundscapes strategy will raise its profile and, its effectiveness in guiding informed decision-making.

Communications and publication

26. We have already made a public commitment to consult on the Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028 over the course of this summer in the [statement of policy intent](#) accompanying the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill. Subject to Cabinet agreement, we propose to publish this consultation before summer recess, accompanied by a brief written statement.

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27. Awareness of, and interest in, Welsh Government noise and soundscape policy at a UK level is currently higher than it has been in previous years, as a result of the recent TAN 11 consultation and the introduction of the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill, both of which go further than the other UK nations. This includes positive references to Welsh Government policy in oral evidence being taken by the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee's **current inquiry** into the health effects of artificial light and noise.

28. This paper may be published 6 weeks after Cabinet meeting, omitting the accompanying draft of the Noise and Soundscape Plan itself which, subject to Cabinet agreement, will be published separately before summer recess, in English and Welsh, on the Welsh Government consultation web pages.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to:

- agree the draft Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028 (Annex B) to launch for public consultation before summer recess.
- note that the final Plan will be adopted as the national strategy on soundscapes required under Part 2 of the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill in December 2023.

Julie James MS
Minister for Climate Change
May 2023

Annex A: Statutory, finance, legal and governance matters

Statutory requirements

Regulation 17 of the Environmental Noise (Wales) Regulations 2006 (“the 2006 Regulations”) requires the Welsh Ministers to review and if necessary revise their noise action plans for major roads, major railways and agglomerations within 5 years of their adoption. The [Noise and Soundscape Action Plan for Wales 2018-2023](#), which encompasses the current noise action plans under the 2006 Regulations, was **adopted on 4 December 2018**. Regulation 20 of the 2006 Regulations requires the Welsh Ministers to ensure the public is consulted about proposals for action plans.

As introduced, section 22(1) of the [Environment \(Air Quality and Soundscapes\) \(Wales\) Bill](#) (“the Bill”) requires the Welsh Ministers to prepare and publish a strategy containing their policies with respect to the assessment and management of soundscapes in Wales. Section 22(2) of the Bill states the strategy must include policies for assessing and reducing levels of noise pollution.

Under section 22(8), if the Welsh Ministers publish a strategy that meets the requirements of sections 22(1) and 22(2) before section 22 comes into force, that strategy is to be treated as the strategy prepared and published under section 22(1).

The draft Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028 has been prepared both to act as the national strategy on soundscapes under the bill, and also to encompass the content of the revised noise action plans required under the 2006 Regulations.

This advice in this paper is informed by the **regulatory impact assessment** and integrated impact assessment accompanying the bill. They included consideration of:

- the 5 ways of working identified within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015
- the Welsh Language Standards
- UNCRC obligations, and
- Equality and Human Rights.

Like the Noise and Soundscape Action Plan 2018-2023, the Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028 has been written with its core message being adherence the 5 ways of working in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Finance requirements and governance implications

There are no new financial implications arising from carrying out a public consultation on the draft Plan. The Plan does not announce any new Welsh Government spending, and focuses rather on better decision-making, taking account of the impacts of changing soundscapes on the well-being of Wales. Any future decisions on funding for noise mitigation measures on the motorway and trunk road network in the 2023-2028 period would be made separately, informed by the principles contained in the Plan, which have been agreed with the Strategic Road Network Division, subject to affordability.

As introduced, section 23 of the bill would require local authorities to have regard to the policies in the strategy published under section 22 when exercising any function of a public nature that could affect soundscapes in Wales. The draft plan, intended to be the national strategy on soundscapes, does not ask any more of local authorities than the previous Noise and Soundscape Action Plan 2018-2023 did, the key expectation for public bodies being to apply the 5 ways

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of working when exercising such functions.

Nevertheless, if part of a local authority does not currently have regard to national policies on noise and soundscapes when exercising functions affecting soundscapes in Wales, section 23 of the bill would now require them to do so. Costs arising from this statutory requirement for a part of a local authority which does not currently have regard to national policy could potentially be offset by savings to that authority's environmental health team arising from better decision-making avoiding the creation of new noise problems. We cannot quantify such costs and benefits at this time. Examples may be forthcoming during the course of the public consultation on the plan and bill scrutiny.

The expected costs to the Welsh Government and local authorities arising from consultation, publication, implementation and 5-yearly review of the Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028 remain consistent with the **regulatory impact assessment** accompanying the bill and the associated advice agreed by ministers in February 2023 (MA/JJ/0286/23 refers).

Research and/or statistics

No new research or statistics are contained within this paper. The draft plan at Annex B refers to a wide range of already published research findings, including a summary of the results of the National Survey for Wales 2021-22 noise questions which has been produced for us by Knowledge and Analytical Services (KAS). In addition to research already in the public domain, Annex A of the draft plan (currently awaiting completion) will contain the results of the 2022 strategic noise mapping exercise.

Joined-up working

This paper has been prepared by officials reporting to the Minister for Climate

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Change, who is lead minister both for noise and soundscape policy and for the Environment (Air Quality and Soundscapes) (Wales) Bill. The draft Noise and Soundscape Plan 2023-2028 has been prepared for public consultation in discussion with, and with contributions from, policy officials across Welsh Government, including air quality, transport, planning, health, energy, remote working, animal welfare and community safety, and external partners in Natural Resources Wales, the Health and Safety Executive, the Ministry of Defence, the Noise Abatement Society, the Institute of Acoustics and the UK Acoustics Network (UKAN+).

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