



Response to Noise Policy Statement for Northern Ireland – a consultation paper Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

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Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Noise Policy Statement for Northern Ireland.

Introduction

Belfast is a leading member of the World Health Organization (WHO) European Healthy Cities Network which has 100 member cities, with a strong track record of meeting WHO goals and objectives. Belfast Healthy Cities (BHC) office has a staff team dedicated to working with partner organisations and key stakeholders to facilitate and support change to improve health equity and wellbeing for people living and working in Belfast and beyond. The office also acts as the link between the city and WHO and BHC currently provides the secretariat to the WHO European Healthy Cities Network. Key partners include Belfast City Council, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Public Health Agency as well as Departments including DOE, DHSSPS and DSD as well as the two universities.

The role of the organisation is through leadership and innovation, to inspire and utilise the collective and individual strengths of partners to deliver the WHO European Healthy City goals and requirements and maximise their impact on health and inequalities. The focus of the global Healthy Cities movement is on the wider physical and social living conditions that shape health and wellbeing and creating conditions that support health and tackle inequalities.

Healthy urban environments has been a core theme of the Healthy Cities movement since the early 2000s. The focus of this area of work is to explore the impact that the physical environment has on health and wellbeing, and identify ways in which policy and practice on the physical environment can also support health and wellbeing. A key principle is that policies that support healthy people and communities also tend to support a healthy environment, and that this often also brings economic benefits.

Comments on the draft Noise Statement

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the draft Noise Policy Statement for Northern Ireland. Noise management, including restrictions where necessary, is an important environmental health protection function that can improve and enhance health and wellbeing.

By 2030 it is expected that almost 5 billion people across the world will be living in towns and cities, and with people living in close proximity to one another it is only natural for more noise to be generated. In line with the WHO Europe public health strategy Health 2020, Belfast Healthy Cities views health as an asset, and investing in health as a major investment for economic and social development. Reduction in exposure to noise can also strengthen productivity among employees, thus having positive economic impacts.

Healthy urban environments is a core area of our work and focuses on highlighting and demonstrating how a high quality, people focused physical environment can support and improve people's lives, health and wellbeing. Our comments are made in light of this rationale, which also stresses that people friendly, healthy environments are a cornerstone of thriving, vibrant communities and economies.

Belfast Healthy Cities is pleased to see the distinction made between "quality of life" effects and "health" effects, which emphasises that long term exposure to certain types of noise can cause direct health effects associated with long term stress. It also recognises the importance of wellbeing, by taking account of negative effects that noise has on people's lives overall. Annoyance is the most widespread impact of noise and affects anywhere up to 25 % of people exposed to road traffic noise (Björk et al 2006). Annoyance can further affect mood and behaviour. For example, noise can induce aggression or helplessness, while people living in noisy areas are less likely to open windows at home. Being irritated on an ongoing basis can vastly reduce wellbeing, and people who are already stressed or anxious are most likely to be affected (London's Health Commission 2003).

BHC believes noise pollution should be just as important as air, water and land pollution and agree it shouldn't be look upon as a problem and as stated is an "inevitable consequence of a mature and vibrant society". Some sounds can be positive and iconic and define the character of a city whereas some can lead to annoyance and complaints. Westminster city has created a policy to protect peaceful spaces and positive sounds as there is growing evidence on the role of positive sounds with potential benefits for health and wellbeing of features that contribute pleasant sounds as well as tackling unwanted sounds.

Belfast Healthy Cities is pleased that the term 'health and wellbeing' is frequently used throughout the document, and also welcomes that reducing negative health effects of noise is a key rationale of the statement. Belfast Healthy Cities believes, however, that the term health equity in all policies (HEiAP) should be made more explicit throughout the document to emphasise the potential of noise policy to contribute to tackling inequalities in health. Belfast Healthy Cities has been pioneering health equity in all policies in Belfast with a number of partners and initiatives, promoting a deeper understanding of how a focus on health equity can strengthen a policy overall. At its core, this approach is about identifying the potential health effects of a policy at an early stage, and from this basis working with policy makers to develop solutions that are intended to achieve the aim of the policy, but in ways that also support health. Belfast Healthy Cities would be pleased to share further information on the HEiAP concept and tool developed in Belfast, should that be helpful.

Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the focus in the statement on improving people's health and wellbeing and achieving improved safeguarding of children and adults most at risk of harm, but suggests more emphasis is put on children's health and wellbeing.

Children are often most vulnerable to environmental stresses, as they are still developing. In addition to affecting sleep and possibly physical health, noise affects children's cognition, ability to concentrate and learn. This, in turn, may have negative knock on effects on children's future learning and health. Aircraft noise appears to have the biggest effect on cognition, while road traffic noise may have less impact on this area of health.

Several studies, including a major cross national study of children living near big European airports, indicate that long term exposure to aircraft noise impairs children's reading comprehension (Stansfeld et al 2005), particularly on difficult items (Haines et al 2001). Young children exposed to long term aircraft noise may also face difficulties in language acquisition and speech recognition (Evans & Maxwell 1997). A study on children living near Heathrow found that exposure to aircraft noise at home may affect children's memory (Matsui et al 2004).

Children exposed to both aircraft and road traffic noise also report high levels of annoyance, and it has been suggested that noise exposure increases children's stress levels (Evans, Bullinger & Hygge 1998). A unique study undertaken as the airport in Munich, Germany, was relocated indicated reduced motivation as a result of noise exposure and a reduction in overall quality of life among children living near the new airport (Bullinger et al 1999).

In March 2010 England introduced the Noise Policy Statement for England. It sets out the Government's policy on noise, including its long term vision of promoting good health and quality of life through the management of noise. BHC believes that the success of England's noise policy statement is encouraging and will be valuable to Belfast to take on board any experiences or difficulties they may have met during the process.

Belfast Healthy Cities believes the policy would be strengthened by making reference to the potential benefits of controlling noise for specific population groups, in particular children but also older people. It would also be helpful to highlight potentially relevant actions or areas for action, such as identifying relevant noise limits in the vicinity of key locations such as schools and crèches or nurseries, and residential homes and day centres for older people. In particular, Belfast Healthy Cities would welcome clarification on the status of the NPSNI in relation to planning policy; giving it status as a material consideration would significantly strengthen opportunities to control exposure to noise in relation to new development. Setting or referring to existing noise standards would also be helpful to strengthen the statement and give it a relevant linkage to existing noise control initiatives.

In conclusion, Belfast Healthy Cities welcomes the Noise Policy Statement for Northern Ireland and in particular its emphasis on the role of noise control in protecting health and wellbeing. The NPSNI would be strengthened by more concrete recommendations for action and a clear linkage to existing noise standards.