

Appendix 6.1 – Basic Acoustic Terminology



Sound is produced by mechanical vibration of a surface, which sets up rapid pressure fluctuations in the surrounding air.

Between the quietest audible sound and the loudest tolerable sound there is a million to one ratio in sound pressure level. It is because of this wide range that a noise level scale based on logarithms is used in noise measurement. This is the decibel or dB scale.

Audibility of sound covers a range of about 0 to 140 decibels (dB) corresponding to the intensity of the sound pressure level. The ability to recognise a particular sound is dependent on the pitch or frequencies present in the source. Sound pressure measurements taken with a microphone cannot differentiate in the same way as the ear, consequently a correction is applied by the noise measuring instrument in order to correspond more closely to the frequency response of the ear which responds to sounds from 20 Hz to 20000 Hz. This is known as 'A weighting' and written as dB(A).

The use of this unit is internationally accepted and correlates well with subjective annoyance to noise.

The logarithmic basis of noise measurements means that when considering more than one noise source their addition must be undertaken in terms of logarithmic arithmetic. Thus, two noise sources each of 40 dB(A) acting together would not give rise to $40 + 40 = 80$ dB(A) but rather $40 + 40 = 43$ dB(A). This 3dB(A) increase represents a doubling in sound energy but would be only just perceptible to a human ear.

The attached chart gives typical noise levels in terms of dB(A) for common situations.

Noise levels can vary with time according to source activity and indices have been developed in order to be able to assign a value to represent a period of noise level variations and to correspond with subjective response.

The definition in layman's terms is given below for terminology used in the measurement and results obtained during the survey work.

- **A-weighting:** Normal hearing covers the frequency (pitch) range from about 20Hz to 20,000 Hz but sensitivity of the ear is greatest between about 500Hz and 5000Hz. The "A-weighting" is an electrical circuit built into noise meters to mimic this characteristic of the human ear.
- **Ambient noise:** The totally encompassing sound in a given situation at a given time usually composed of sound from many sources near and far.
- **Attenuation:** Noise reduction



- **Background noise:** The general quiet periods of ambient noise when the noise source under investigation is not there.
- **Decibel (dB):** The unit of measurement for sound based on a logarithmic scale. 0dB is the threshold of normal hearing; 140dB is the threshold of pain. A change of 1dB is only detectable under controlled laboratory conditions.
- **dB(A) [decibel A weighted]:** Decibels measured on a sound level meter incorporating a frequency weighting (A weighting) serves to distinguish sounds of different frequency (or pitch) in a similar way to how the human ear responds. Measurements in dB(A) broadly agrees with an individual's assessment of loudness. A change of 3dB(A) is the minimum perceptible under normal everyday conditions, and a change of 10dB(A) corresponds roughly to doubling or halving the loudness of sound.
- **dB(C): [decibel C weighted]:** Frequency weighting which does not alter low frequency octave band levels by very much compared to 'A' weighting. Similar to linear reading (i.e. linear does not alter frequency spectra at all)
- **Frequency (Hz):** The number of sound waves to pass a point in one second.
- **L_{Aeq}:** This is a noise index used to describe the "average" level of a noise that varies with time (T). It allows for the different sensitivities of the human ear to different frequencies (pitch), and averages fluctuating noise levels in a manner, which correlates well with human perceptions of loudness.
- **L_{A10,T}:** This noise index gives an indication of the upper limit or peak levels of the fluctuating noise. It is the "A weighted" noise level exceeded for 10 per cent of the specified measurement period (T). e.g. If the measurement period was over 10 hours and the L_{A10} reading was say 60dB, then this means that for 1 hour out of 10 the level went above 60dB.
- **L_{A90,T}:** This noise index gives an indication of the lower limit or levels of the fluctuating noise. It is the "A weighted" noise level exceeded for 90 per cent of the specified measurement period (T). e.g. If the measurement period was over 10 hours and the L_{A90} reading was say 50dB, then this means that for 9 hours out of 10 the level went above 50dB.
- **L_{Amax}:** This is the highest A weighted noise level recorded during a noise measurement period.
- **L_{night,outside} :** This is the A-weighted long-term average sound level measured outside as defined in ISO 1996-2: 1987, determined over all the night periods of a year.
- **Residual noise:** The ambient noise remaining at a given position in a given



situation when the noise source under investigation is not there.

- **Specific noise:** The noise source under investigation for assessing the likelihood of complaints.

Examples of typical noise levels

Source/Activity	Indicative noise level [dB(A)]
Threshold of hearing	0
Rural night-time background	20-40
Quiet bedroom	35
Wind farm at 350m	35-45
Busy road at 5km	35-45
Car at 65km/h at 100m	55
Busy general office	60
Conversation	60
Truck at 50km/h at 100m	65
City Traffic at 5m	75-85
Pneumatic drill at 7m	95
Jet aircraft at 250m	105
Threshold of pain	140

