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Keep calm and carry on: Brits getting intolerant of noise pollution

People are becoming increasingly intolerant of loud music, barking dogs, noisy neighbours, road traffic and aircraft noise, a major government survey has found.

According to a government survey of attitudes conducted once a decade, noise has risen from ninth to fourth since 2000 in the league table of perceived local environmental problems and is now on a level with air pollution and only behind dog fouling, litter and the loss of green belt land.

Research by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs found that 48% of the 2,750 people surveyed in England and Wales felt that their home life was being spoilt by noise, with one in five saying it kept them awake at night.

But while the survey found little change in the proportion of people saying they are affected by unwelcome noise, 11-17% more people said they were significantly upset by it.

"There has been a strongly statistically significant increase in the proportion of respondents who report being bothered, annoyed or disturbed to some extent by road traffic, neighbours, aircraft and building ... despite no material increase in the proportion of the population hearing noise from these four sources," said the report.

The survey also found 10-16% fewer people saying they were not at all adversely affected by noise. "This suggests that the population may be less tolerant of noise than in 2000," said the report.

Neighbour noise and road traffic continue to be the two biggest noise problems, aircraft noise was found to be the fastest growing source of irritation, with nearly three quarters of respondents reporting hearing it and 13% giving 'moderate', 'very' or 'extreme' ratings for being bothered, annoyed or disturbed.

John Stewart, chair of HACAN, the group which campaigns for noise reduction around Heathrow, said the airport has seen a five-fold increase in complaints about noise over the past year. "The results [of the survey] are revealing. This dramatic increase in the numbers disturbed by aircraft took place during a decade when planes were becoming a little quieter. It can only be accounted for by the rise in the number of aircraft using UK airports."

However, a spokeswoman for Heathrow airport said a large number of the complaints came from a single individual, with the top 10 complainants making almost 2,000 complaints per person.

Nearly 200,000 noise complaints were made to local councils in 2012 but, says the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, fewer than 20 people were fined.

Older, retired people were found to be less likely than middle-aged adults to report negatively about the amount of noise in their local environment.

"Noise is an inevitable consequence of a mature and vibrant society. With the increase in population over the past decade in the UK and the development of infrastructure to accommodate that increase, it follows that some noise must continue to occur, indeed as an inevitable consequence. However, the results suggest that the population may be less tolerant of noise than in 2000," the report concluded.