

Minimalist interior design and powerful sound systems all contribute to the din in some licensed premises, and with new anti-noise legislation on the horizon it's a good time to consider the effect on your customers as well as the neighbours. *Ben Walker* listens to some sound advice

Noise annoys

There is a pub I particularly like near London Bridge. It has a light-filled wooden interior, the food is good, the beers have been carefully chosen and there's no smoking throughout – all in all a very pleasant spot for lunch or dinner. The only drawback is that when it fills up it's hard to hear what the person opposite you is saying unless you are both shouting.

It would seem this venue has been let down by bad acoustic design. I decided to get the opinion of an expert and invited him along to hear for himself. Peter Hepworth is managing director of Hepworth Acoustics, a firm that tackles noise and vibration issues for a large roster of hospitality clients, including Mitchells & Butlers, the Laurel Pub Company, Living Ventures, and Spirit Group.

As we sit down Hepworth says he can see why I have taken him here: "The surfaces are all hard – wooden floor, timber ceiling, wooden chairs and tables, lots of large windows, and ceramic tiles on the bar." These are all acoustically reflective materials so the sound just bounces around without being absorbed. "The background noise level will keep rising," he says.

"It's the equivalent of heat: unless you open a window the room will just keep getting hotter and hotter."

So what could the owners do to reduce the noise levels? Rather than the solid timber ceiling, Hepworth says, they could put in a slatted ceiling with a surface of fibreglass or rockwool behind. Both of these are insulation materials which would absorb the noise. Upholstered seats, curtains and drapes on the walls would all help absorb the sound. Obviously, this would alter the pub's stripped-down look.

The trend for minimalist design that started in the early 1990s explains why so many modern pubs and bars are noisy. High-street chains such as All Bar One and Pitcher & Piano are dominated by the use of slate, stone, wood and glass, which are all acoustically reflective materials. Hepworth says that on a busy Saturday night, modern minimalist bars and clubs, when playing loud music, are some of the noisiest places he has visited in a professional capacity.

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HOW TO REDUCE NOISE LEVELS

- Consider internal acoustics at the design stage.
- Use a larger number of small loudspeakers for the music system.



But the main focus of Hepworth's work is to ensure noise doesn't escape from a venue, not how good the acoustic quality is inside for customers. "In 20 years in business I am struggling to remember when anyone has asked me how to improve the acoustics inside the venue," he says. "They all seem to think everyone enjoys shouting at each other in pubs."

This situation could change thanks to changes to the law to ensure that workers' hearing is protected from excessive noise. The current Control of Noise at Work Regulations came into force for all industry sectors in April. But the entertainment and licensed trade has been given an extra two years to comply.

From April 2008 the level at which pub, club and bar owners will have to provide hearing protection will be 85 decibels (daily or weekly average exposure), and the level at which employers must assess the risk to workers' health will be 80 decibels.

A large group of happy diners has sat down next to us. The background noise has increased and we are having to raise our

- Zone the music system so there are quieter areas.
- Keep loudspeakers away from the bar serveries.
- Do not use all hard surfaces in the premises.
- Consider using absorbent materials behind slatted finishes.
- Consider using acoustic plaster on ceilings.
- Build absorbent materials into design features.
- Consider using drapes, carpets, upholstered furniture and wall hangings.



voices. Hepworth tells me that, come April 2008, the owners of pubs and most clubs and bars will have to look at the hours of their staff and average out their exposure to noise over a typical week. "It may not be necessary to change anything here, but they will have to do the risk assessment," he says. Some venues will require major changes to meet the limits.

A more timely concern for operators is noise escaping from their premises during the hours of 11pm to 7am, especially in light of this month's amendment of the Noise Act.

Environmental health officers now have the power to issue on-the-spot fines of £500 to pubs, clubs and bars that fail to reduce their noise after a complaint from a neighbour. The noise level is measured from inside the complainant's home. Hepworth believes this new policy will be a more powerful deterrent than before, as it is usually a long

road to prosecution for repeat noise offenders.

Hepworth Acoustics has a turnover of £1.5m and is seeing a 30% growth in business year-on-year. In part, this is due to the proliferation of mixed-use developments in city centres, where businesses need to make sure they are soundproof before they open.

The principle of good soundproof design is to create a room within a room, with a floating floor and ceiling and independent linings to the walls; the wider the air gaps between elements, the better the soundproofing. Good soundproofing can mean a nightclub, cinema and residential flats can happily exist side by side.

If not dealt with at the start of a building project, however, noise leakage can be disastrous and very expensive to correct. "I've been in a building where there was music in the basement and you could hear what song

was playing in a flat 12 floors above," says Hepworth.

One of the most challenging projects he's tackled was an O'Neils pub in Bristol inside a renovated building with residential flats above. The cost of the soundproofing and acoustic consultancy alone was £250,000.

Another part of Hepworth's job is acting as an expert witness in court.

Westminster City Council generates a lot of work for him because of its strict stance on licensing. Nearly all of the applications it receives for extended licences go to appeal. This is where Hepworth comes in to give evidence to support the client's case.

West End nightclub Movida is currently appealing for a 5am licence. "We'll give evidence and assess the noise implications. We carry out noise surveys. Is there noise escaping from the venue, or is the noise of people leaving going to be a problem? If

THE NOISE ACT

From last Sunday (1 October) local authorities have a further power to deal with noise from licensed premises between 11pm and 7am.

At the discretion of local councils, environmental health officers (EHOs) can issue on-the-spot fines of £500 to licensed premises that fail to reduce excessive noise.

The EHO will give the premises a warning notice and a short time (typically five minutes) to reduce the noise.

At the end of the period given, the noise will be measured from within the premises of the complainant.

If it is found to exceed the permitted level, the pub, club or bar owner will receive an on-the-spot fine.

The Forum Bar in Sheffield, where Hepworth Acoustics has designed noise controls allowing customers to enjoy the live music without it annoying the neighbours

it is the latter, we recommend that venues use a dedicated taxi service to order cabs inside the premises."

At the end of our meal we ask the waitress if the pub gets any complaints about noise. "Never from customers, but sometimes from neighbours," she says. Then she asks us if we think it's noisy inside.

"I notice that I'm having to raise my voice," Hepworth says. "It's getting the balance right, isn't it? You don't want to go somewhere where people can hear your every word, and you don't want to have to shout when someone is 2ft in front of you."

We step into the street, and despite the rumble of roadworks in the distance it is noticeably quieter and easier to carry on our conversation.