# Noise at Work Regulations: A Practical Guide to Protecting Hearing

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## Why Noise at Work Still Matters

Noise-induced hearing loss develops slowly, often over years of repeated exposure. Employees rarely notice anything is wrong until they struggle to follow conversation in a busy room, or until a

persistent ringing in the ears, known as tinnitus, becomes impossible to ignore. By that point the damage is permanent. There is no treatment that restores hearing lost this way, which makes prevention the only real option.

Hearing loss is a well-recognised occupational health problem in the UK, and it affects a wide range of sectors, not just heavy industry. Workshops, print rooms, plant rooms, warehouses with reversing vehicles and alarms, and construction sites all carry noise risks. Businesses in manufacturing and engineering and construction tend to have the most obvious exposure, but anyone running machinery, power tools, extraction fans or compressors for extended periods needs to think about it too.

The good news is that noise exposure can be managed with well-established control measures. Many of them, such as maintenance, scheduling and job rotation, cost little, although quieter machinery or enclosures may need some investment.

## Noise Levels and Your Legal Duties

Sound is measured in decibels (dB) on a logarithmic scale. An increase of 3 dB represents a doubling of sound energy, so a change that looks small on paper can mean a much greater risk to hearing. Two machines each producing 85 dB running together produce roughly 88 dB, not 170 dB.

As a rough guide, normal conversation sits around 60 dB, a busy road or a vacuum cleaner is in the region of 70 to 80 dB, and power tools and industrial machinery regularly reach 90 to 100 dB or higher. If people have to shout to be heard at a distance of two metres, noise levels are probably around 85 dB or more, which is enough to trigger duties under the regulations.

The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 set out three thresholds based on daily or weekly personal noise exposure:

- **Lower exposure action value, 80 dB:** you must carry out a risk assessment, provide information and training to affected employees, and make hearing protection available to anyone who asks for it.
- **Upper exposure action value, 85 dB:** you must take action to reduce exposure, mark out and signpost hearing protection zones, and ensure hearing protection is actually worn, not just available.
- **Exposure limit value, 87 dB:** this must never be exceeded, taking into account the protection provided by hearing protection. Separate peak sound pressure values apply to impulsive noise, such as hammering or cartridge tools.

Responsibility sits with the employer, usually discharged through a director, site manager or health and safety lead. The assessment must be carried out, or overseen, by a competent person who understands noise measurement and the regulations. Many smaller businesses lack this expertise in-house, so engaging a specialist noise measurement provider for the technical readings, or a health and safety consultancy to interpret results and build a management plan, is entirely normal.

## Carrying Out a Noise Risk Assessment

A proper noise assessment identifies every role and task where exposure might be significant, measures or reliably estimates the noise levels involved, and sets out what action is needed. It should cover intermittent sources such as power tools, reversing alarms and extraction systems, and work by visiting contractors or maintenance staff who are not on site every day.

Accurate measurement requires calibrated sound level meters or noise dosimeters and someone trained to use them, which is a specialist task rather than something to estimate by ear. Where a business lacks this capability internally, a competent person service can help you decide what specialist support you need and make sure the resulting assessment is acted on rather than filed away.

Common mistakes include assuming that because a workplace has always been noisy it must be fine, forgetting to add up exposure across several shorter noisy tasks during a shift, and treating hearing protection as a complete solution rather than a last resort. Review the assessment whenever equipment, process or layout changes, and periodically in any case, since noise levels can creep up as machinery ages or maintenance slips.

## Controlling Noise Exposure: The Hierarchy in Action

The standard hierarchy of control applies to noise as it does to any other hazard, and hearing protection should be the last resort rather than the first response.

- Eliminate the noisy process entirely where there is a practical alternative.
- Substitute noisy equipment for quieter models, for example low-noise tools or modern machinery designed with acoustic enclosures.
- Use engineering controls such as sound-absorbing enclosures, vibration-damping mounts, silencers on compressors and extraction systems, and regular maintenance to stop worn components becoming noisier over time.
- Reduce exposure time through job rotation or scheduling noisy tasks when fewer people are present.
- Only then rely on hearing protection as the final layer of control, used within clearly marked hearing protection zones.

Businesses in warehousing and logistics often overlook reversing alarms, conveyor systems and compactors as noise sources, so it is worth assessing the whole site rather than just the production floor.

## Hearing Protection and Health Surveillance

Where hearing protection is genuinely necessary, it has to suit the noise levels and the working conditions, including compatibility with other PPE such as hard hats or safety glasses. Over-protection causes its own problems by cutting workers off from verbal warnings and alarms, so choose based on actual exposure rather than the highest-rated product. Staff need training in

fitting, inspection, storage and replacement, since a poorly fitted ear plug or a cracked ear defender offers far less protection than it appears to.

Where employees are regularly exposed above the upper exposure action value, or where the risk assessment shows a risk to health at lower levels, health surveillance through audiometric hearing checks should be arranged. This involves an initial baseline test followed by periodic retesting to catch deterioration early. Audiometric testing is a specialist medical service and should be arranged through an occupational health provider; the employer's responsibility is to act on the results, which might mean reviewing controls, retraining on protective equipment, or restricting further exposure for an affected individual.

## Records You Need to Keep

Good record keeping protects both your workforce and your business if your approach is ever questioned. At a minimum you should retain:

- The written noise risk assessment, including the date it was carried out and the name of the competent person responsible.
- Details of control measures implemented, with dates and who authorised them.
- Training records showing who received information on noise risks and hearing protection use.
- Maintenance and issue records for hearing protection equipment.
- Health surveillance records, kept securely and in a form you can retrieve years later, since hearing loss can take years to become apparent.

These records should feed into your regular auditing and inspection programme, so that noise controls are checked alongside everything else rather than reviewed only when someone complains.

## Getting Expert Support

Meeting your duties under the noise at work regulations is manageable once the right framework is in place, but it does require a proper assessment, consistent control measures and honest record keeping rather than guesswork.

Integral Safety, based in Coalville, can help you build that framework through our consultancy, competent person and auditing services, and our IOSH approved Managing Safely training helps managers spot noise and other hazards early. If your business is in the East Midlands and you are not confident your noise arrangements would stand up to scrutiny, get in touch.

## Talk to Integral Safety Ltd

We are health and safety consultants based in Coalville, Leicestershire, working with businesses across the East Midlands. If anything in this guide applies to your workplace, we can help.

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This guide is general information about UK health and safety law and practice, correct as at 11 November 2026. It is not advice on your particular circumstances. The latest version is at https://integralsafetyltd.co.uk/blog/noise-at-work-protecting-your-employees-hearing.