

# Access to cafés, pubs, and restaurants – Policy statement

## 1. Summary of our position

People who are deaf or have hearing loss or tinnitus struggle in too many cafés, pubs, and restaurants. A combination of excessive noise, challenging acoustic environments, dim lighting, and lack of deaf awareness among staff, can make venues inaccessible for people with hearing loss.

This is a matter of public health, human rights, and making economically strong business decisions. Inaccessible venues exclude customers – and businesses should be aware that preference for good-quality venues extends beyond the 11 million people with hearing loss in the UK.

### **Healthy spaces**

Frequent exposure to loud noise in social settings can cause a host of mental and physical problems, including hearing loss, cardiovascular issues, stress, and feeling socially isolated.

### **Equal spaces**

Visiting restaurants, cafés, and pubs should all be part of leading a full social life. We want to remove the barriers currently experienced by those with hearing loss to ensure equal access to these social spaces.

### **Profitable spaces**

Inaccessible venues exclude customers – and not only those who have a diagnosed hearing loss. Businesses should be aware that many people struggle in noisy venues.

## 2. Introduction

This policy statement outlines the main issues for people with hearing loss, deafness and tinnitus when visiting cafés, pubs, and restaurants. It also includes our position on the issues and suggests what actions need to be taken to improve access.<sup>1</sup>

We use the term ‘people with hearing loss’ throughout to refer to people who are deaf, deafened, and hard of hearing.

## 3. Evidence

This section evidences our position on access to cafés, pubs and restaurants. The section largely focuses on the problem with noisy venues but also highlights the issue of deaf and hearing loss awareness amongst staff.

### 3.1 Noise

Many eating and drinking venues are too loud. Results from our Speak Easy survey show that:

- Nearly four out of five (79%) respondents said they had difficulty holding a conversation in restaurants due to the levels of background music.
- Over four out of five (81%) respondents said they had difficulty holding a conversation due to high levels of environmental noise, such as that made by other diners or coming from the kitchen.
- A large majority of our survey respondents (79%) have left a restaurant, café or pub early because of the noise.<sup>2</sup>

Decibel readings we took in 2017 in eating and drinking venues further demonstrate the high level of noise existing in some restaurants – at their busiest, some had sound volumes of 90 decibels, which is equivalent to sitting next to a motorbike or lawnmower.

This problem is perceived to be getting worse. Over three-quarters (77%) of respondents in our survey believe restaurants, cafés and pubs have become louder in the past five years. The 2017 *Good Food Guide* highlighted that the number of readers telling them about loud venues has rocketed compared to previous years:

**“Restaurants are getting noisier – that’s what our readers, this year in unprecedented numbers, are telling us.”<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Please note that, like many policy documents, this statement reflects the issues relevant at the time of writing. Over time this may be subject to change, such as when new legislation is introduced, and we may review and amend the document.

<sup>2</sup> Action on Hearing Loss (2016) Speak Easy: Hearing the views of your customers.

<sup>3</sup> [telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/17/restaurants-deafening-diners-glastonbury-style-music-good-food/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/17/restaurants-deafening-diners-glastonbury-style-music-good-food/)

### 3.1.1 Why are eating and drinking venues so loud?

The design of a space can have a big impact on ‘reverberation time’ – the length of time it takes for a sound to ‘drop’ after the noise source has stopped generating sound. Room acoustics are made much worse by hard surfaces and hard furniture, such as bare floors and walls, wooden chairs and tables, or granite and marble counter-tops; the sound waves they generate bounce around, creating a loud, echoey environment. Softer materials, such as carpets, tablecloths and curtains, would absorb these sound waves and reduce the reverberation time.

Modern restaurant and bar design often incorporates these hard surfaces. Jeremy Luscombe from Resonics (a company that helps restaurants reduce noise levels with acoustic panels for walls and ceilings) comments:

**“Industrial designs with concrete finishes and hard surfaces mean noise is propelled around the room.”<sup>4</sup>**

### 3.1.2 The problem with noisy venues

#### **Noise can cause ill-health.**

Noise exposure has several adverse effects on health:

#### **Exposure to noisy environments can permanently damage your hearing.**

Continued exposure to noise at, or above, 80-85dB can cause hearing loss.<sup>5</sup> This is particularly relevant for restaurant and pub staff who, going by our decibel readings, could potentially be exposed to high volumes of noise over long periods of time. According to the Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005, the level at which employers must provide hearing protection and hearing protection zones is 85dB (daily or weekly average exposure), and the level at which employers must assess the risk to workers’ health – and provide them with information and training – is 80dB.<sup>6</sup> Venues must be aware of these regulations, and the risks to staff health, and take the appropriate action.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in [bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-07/why-it-s-so-difficult-to-turn-down-the-volume-at-popular-restaurants](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-07/why-it-s-so-difficult-to-turn-down-the-volume-at-popular-restaurants)

<sup>5</sup> [nhs.uk/Livewell/hearing-problems/Pages/tips-to-protect-hearing.aspx](https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/hearing-problems/Pages/tips-to-protect-hearing.aspx)

<sup>6</sup> [hse.gov.uk/noise/regulations.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/noise/regulations.htm)

## **Loud venues could contribute to the social isolation of people with hearing loss.**

Eating and drinking venues are key places where people meet to socialise. Our research found that people with hearing loss often feel unable to socialise with friends and family at a restaurant, café, or pub that's too noisy:

**“Eating out is one of life’s pleasures. It’s meant to be sociable and fun, but often I end up feeling excluded because of the noise...Sometimes I just have to say no to an invitation if it’s to a venue I know is noisy.”<sup>9</sup>**

This potential decrease in social interaction can have a detrimental impact on health. Studies have shown that a decrease in social interaction and communication increases the likelihood of social isolation<sup>10</sup>, which is recognised as a negative health outcome. Indeed, some research shows that the effects of social isolation are comparable to those of other well-established risk factors, including smoking.<sup>11</sup>

## **Noise can have a negative impact on business.**

Our research tells us that many people are put off by noisy restaurants. Nearly all (91%) of respondents in our survey said they wouldn't return to a restaurant, café or pub if the noise levels were too high.<sup>12</sup> With 11 million people in the UK with hearing loss, that's potentially a massive loss of custom.

And it's not just people with hearing loss who're put off noisy venues. Our survey of the general public, showed that:

- Nearly half (49%) of respondents across the UK have left a café, pub or restaurant because it was too noisy.
- They would spend more if they were guaranteed a quieter dining experience, with three-quarters of people saying they would do this (75%).

7 Ising H, Kruppa B, 2004. Health effects caused by noise: Evidence in the literature from the past 25 years. *Noise and Health*, vol. 6, no. 22, pp 5-13

8 Tabraiz S, Ahmad S, Shehzadi I, Asif MB, 2015. Study of physio-psychological effects on traffic wardens due to traffic noise pollution; exposure-effect relation. *J Environ Health Sci Eng*.

9 Action on Hearing Loss (2016) *Speak Easy: Hearing the views of your customers*

10 Ciorba A, Bianchini C, Pelucchi S and Pastore A, 2012. The impact of hearing loss on the quality of life of elderly adults. *Clinical Interventions in Aging*, 7, 159-63

11 Holt-Lunstad J, TB, Layton JB. 2010. Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine* 7 (7)

12 Action on Hearing Loss (2016) *Speak Easy: Hearing the views of your customers*

13 Action on Hearing Loss Survey of the general public n. 1200, 2016

- Over two in five (43%) people said that the thought of a noisy restaurant has influenced their decision to get a take-away instead of eating out.<sup>13</sup>

Further, other studies have shown that noise puts people off: a survey conducted by Zagat, a restaurant review site, found that noise in restaurants is diners' number one irritant.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to losing custom because of loud environments, profits could be affected by the fact that high levels of noise have a negative impact on how diners experience the flavour of food and drink.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, people mention noisy restaurants, pubs and cafés in reviews; thereby potentially damaging the reputation of businesses. These are reviews by both customers on sites such as TripAdvisor<sup>16</sup> and restaurant critics<sup>17</sup>. One restaurant critic wrote:

**“Noise levels here were very high due to all the hard surfaces – wood floor, marble tables, mirrors on walls. This evening at our table I measured the noise at typically around a hefty 110 decibels (similar to being next to a power saw) and peaking at a troublesome 139 decibels (similar to being near a jet engine and at the threshold of causing hearing damage). What the room definitely did not need was to add to the cacophony with music, but this was played later in the evening. Some hours later, my ears are still ringing as I type this.”<sup>18</sup>**

Indeed, some restaurant critics have noticed the increase in noise to such an extent that they're now carrying decibel readers with them.<sup>19</sup>

Customer loyalty is crucial to business success<sup>20</sup> and this loyalty is won through customer satisfaction and positive experiences.<sup>21</sup> Further, studies have shown that most people choose to eat at restaurants that offer a level of comfort for socialising.<sup>22</sup>

14 [zagat.com/b/the-state-of-american-dining-in-2016](http://zagat.com/b/the-state-of-american-dining-in-2016)

15 Spence (2014) Noise and its impact on the perception of food and drink, *Flavour* 3:9

16 [tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g186338-d1993009-r131786312-Barbecoa-London\\_England.html](http://tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g186338-d1993009-r131786312-Barbecoa-London_England.html)

17 John T. Lang (2014) Sound and the City, *Food, Culture & Society*, 17:4, 571-589.

18 [andyhayler.com/restaurant/blandford-comptoir](http://andyhayler.com/restaurant/blandford-comptoir)

19 [grubstreet.com/2013/07/adam-platt-on-loud-restaurants.html](http://grubstreet.com/2013/07/adam-platt-on-loud-restaurants.html)

20 Carola Raab, Dina Marie V. Zemke, Jean L. Hertzman & Dipendra Singh (2013) Restaurant customers' perceptions of noise and their satisfaction and loyalty behaviors, *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*, 14:4, 398-414.

21 Raab et al., 2013; Petrick, J. F. (2004). First timers' and repeaters' perceived value. *Journal of Travel Research*, 43, 29-38; Wong, A., & Sohal, A. (2003). Service quality and customer loyalty perspectives on two levels of retail relationships. *Journal of Service Marketing*, 17, 495-513.

22 Moschis, G., Folkman, C., and Bellenger, D. (2003). Restaurant-selection preferences of mature consumers. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 51-60.

It follows, then, that if customers are dissatisfied with noisy restaurants, they won't be loyal, which will have an impact on revenue. Loud venues may encourage customers to consume more – but they also deter people from going in the first place.

### 3.1.3 Noisy venues make them inaccessible for people with hearing loss

Everyone should have the opportunity to access restaurants, pubs and cafés. The Equality Act 2010 (the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 in Northern Ireland) requires those providing services to the public, including cafés, pubs, and restaurants, to make 'reasonable adjustments' so that people with disabilities can access their services.

## 3.2 Staff awareness

Interaction with staff can also be problematic for those with hearing loss. Over a third (36%) of respondents to our survey had experience of staff being unaware of how to communicate with them in a restaurant setting, with 37% of people having experienced this in a pub, and 38% in a café setting. Moreover, staff can be unaware of how to improve the experience of someone with hearing loss, as this comment from a respondent to our Speak Easy survey shows:

**“Staff are unused to being asked for a quiet table and don't know which tables to suggest.”**  
Survey respondent

## 4. Recommendations

### 4.1 Noise reduction

- Consider acoustic aspects of interior design in venues. The most suitable treatments for cafés, pubs and restaurants are wall and ceiling panels which use absorption to reduce the reverberation time of sounds in the room, significantly reducing background noise. Acoustic treatments can be 'retrofitted' within existing venues, or incorporated into new builds. Installing double-glazed windows can also help.
- If the venue is open plan, build partitions.

- Use soft furnishings, such as tablecloths, cushions and rugs, to boost sound absorption and help prevent the unpleasant effects of too much background noise or echo. Fitting rubber caps on chair and table legs is a cheap and effective way to reduce the scraping and clatter of furniture.
- Staff should reduce the volume of background music and use speakers and sound systems that allow for quality of sound without excessive volume.
- Quiet areas should be made available for customers who need them. Making an area quiet could mean not using speakers and/or having tables more spaced out. Information should also be given to customers about where the quiet tables are.

## 4.2 Staff awareness and venue information

- We recommend that all staff be given hearing loss awareness training and that this is a priority for front of house staff. This training should cover how to communicate with people with hearing loss.
- Provide information about the accessibility of the venue so that someone with hearing loss can assess whether a venue is suitable for them. Information should cover whether music is played and the availability of a quiet area or quiet tables.

## 4.3 Lighting

- Lipreading is a vital communication skill for many people with hearing loss, particularly in noisier environments. A venue needs well-lit spaces so that customers who rely on lipreading can follow conversations and communicate effectively.

## 5. Further information

For more information about the Speak Easy campaign, please contact us:

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Read our *Speak Easy* report and guide to improving the customer experience:

[actiononhearingloss.org.uk/how-we-help/information-and-resources/publications/research-reports/speak-easy-report/](https://actiononhearingloss.org.uk/how-we-help/information-and-resources/publications/research-reports/speak-easy-report/)