

Hearing the views of your customers

by Luke Dixon



Nearly 80%

of people have left
a restaurant, café or
pub early because
of the noise

For many of us, dining out is a favourite way to socialise. Restaurants, cafés and pubs aren't just places to eat and drink; they should be pleasant social spaces for getting together with our nearest and dearest – and getting to know new friends. Whether it's a family celebration, a quick coffee with an old friend, or after-work drinks with colleagues, it's in our huge range of restaurants, cafés and pubs that people in the UK gather to spend their time... and money.

Right now, there are 11 million people with hearing loss in the UK. As our population ages, the figure's set to rise to over 15 million by 2035. Already, the over-50s control more than two-thirds of the nation's wealth, so venues that are out of touch with the needs and concerns of people with hearing loss – and the many other people who struggle to hear in background noise – risk losing out on a huge slice of the pie before they've even proffered their carefully crafted menus.

At the same time, recent interior-design trends have seen venues employ bold, sleek aesthetics; that usually means lots of hard surfaces and high ceilings. Unfortunately, without furnishings that absorb sound, the high level of noise created by a room full of conversations – and increased further by background music – makes it much harder for many people to have a decent conversation.

When our members and supporters talk to us about their day-to-day challenges, one thing always tops the list: people with hearing loss are struggling to socialise in Britain's restaurants, cafés and pubs.

As a charity dedicated to overcoming the social isolation that often accompanies hearing loss, we set out to find out more – so we could take effective action. In late 2015, we were helped by 1,461 people completing an online survey telling us about their personal experiences in restaurants, cafés and pubs – and the changes they'd like to see.



My perfect restaurant would be relatively small. It would have carpet, curtains, and tables with tablecloths.

“I’d like to be seated at a table close to a wall, away from the entrance, bar or kitchen. Any music would be quiet but I’d always choose to be in an area without any music. If I knew I’d be able to hear for most of the time, then I’d feel very happy stepping through the doors!

The building issues aside, the manager needs to be deaf aware and know where best to seat people who are deaf or have hearing loss.”

Valerie

Key findings

The 1,461 people who completed our survey told us that background noise is a major and growing problem for people with hearing loss when they eat and drink in restaurants, cafés and pubs. The vast majority of respondents without hearing loss also identified background noise as a key concern.

What brings people into restaurants?

When they're choosing a restaurant, our respondents view low noise levels as second only to quality of food as a factor in deciding where to go.

Seven out of 10 people with hearing loss and/or tinnitus said a lower level of noise was an important factor for them.

The same was true for even more respondents with no hearing loss – **84% said they considered lower noise levels important when picking a restaurant.**

This last figure, in particular, emphasises just how fundamental the issue of noise is becoming for customers when eating out. When given the choice between two venues, our findings show that people with or without hearing loss are much more likely to choose to dine in a quieter environment.

What's keeping people away?

- 79% of respondents said they had difficulty holding a conversation in restaurants due to the levels of background music.
- 81% said they had difficulty holding a conversation due to high levels of environmental noise, such as the noise made by other diners and coming from the kitchen.



Nine out of 10 people say background noise is the biggest problem they face when eating out

What is background noise?

Our 2015 survey of nearly 1,500 people identified background noise as the combination of environmental noise (for example, people talking or the noise made by a coffee machine or cutlery clattering on a table) and background music.

77% of respondents believe restaurants, cafés and pubs have become louder in the past five years.

What changes do people want?

- 84% cited a reduction in environmental noise in their top three issues to address.
- 55% stated that venues should make designating a quiet area a priority. Customers would be assured of avoiding major background noise sources, such as speakers and exits and entrances (see page 13 for more information about quiet areas).

92% of respondents



identified a reduction in background music as one of the top three changes they want restaurants, cafés and pubs to make



Our recommendation

Background noise is getting worse. People with hearing loss are finding it more and more difficult to enjoy restaurants, cafés and pubs with friends and family, while many people without hearing loss struggle to hold a conversation in these increasingly noisy environments.

If you work in the restaurant, café or pub industry – and people have said your noisy venue is turning them off – please get in touch!

We can help you to:

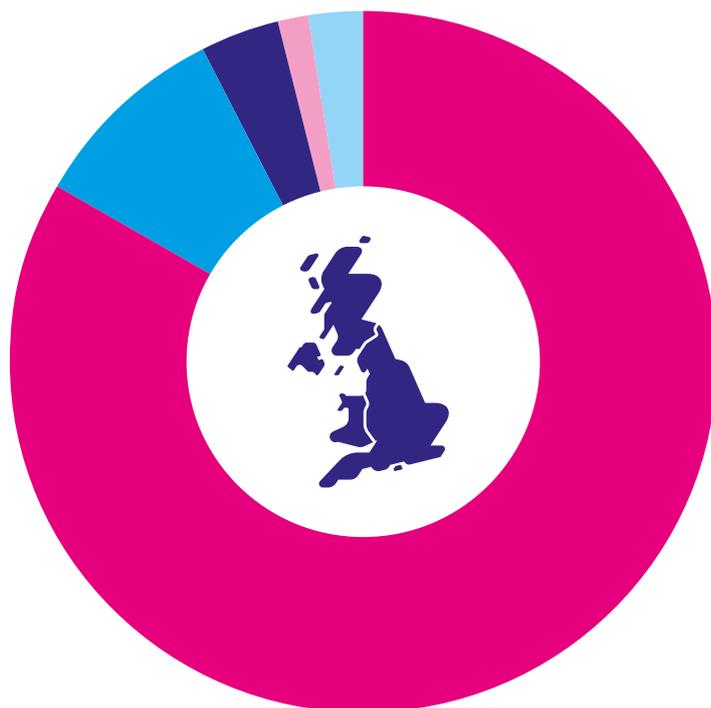
- identify straightforward changes you can make to your venue(s), without compromising your brand aesthetics
- promote your commitment to creating an accessible environment for people with hearing loss – and the wider public.

Speak Easy survey findings

This report draws on the findings of a survey carried out between October and November 2015. The aim was to find out the views and experiences of people with hearing loss, and their loved ones, when visiting restaurants, cafés and pubs. A total of 1,461 people took part in the survey.

Who took the survey?

Almost three-quarters of the survey respondents reported having either tinnitus, hearing loss, or both. More than four in five are aged 55 and above, with 39% between 65 and 74 years old. This is no surprise, as the prevalence of hearing loss in the UK increases with age: more than 41% of people aged 50 and over have some level of hearing loss, rising to 71% of people aged 70 and over.



Location of respondents

- **England:** 1,213
- **Scotland:** 132
- **Wales:** 53
- **Northern Ireland:** 19
- **Other:** 34

15 and under: >1%

18-24: >1%

35-44: 5%

45-54: 12%

55-64: 24%



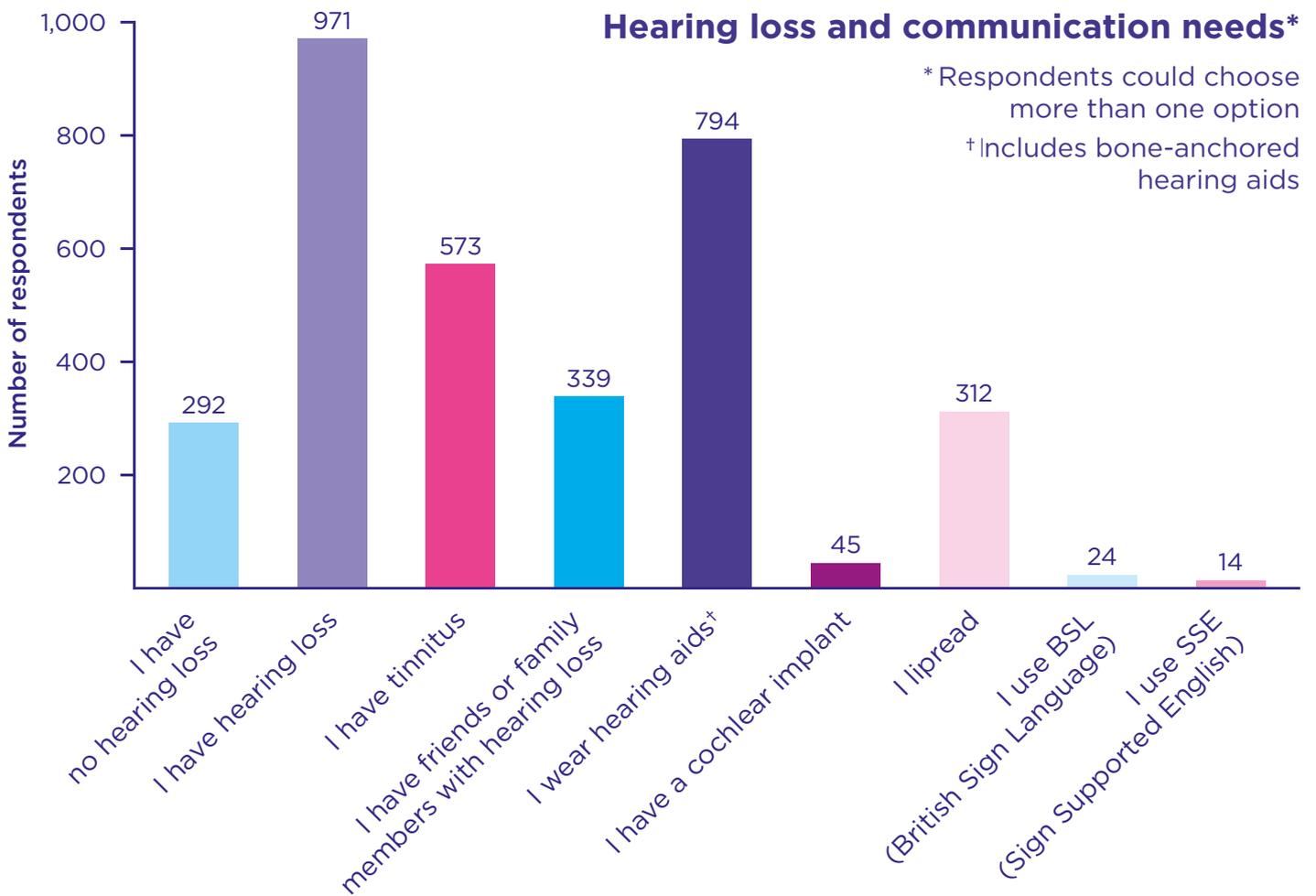
25-34: 2%

16-17: >1%

- 88% of respondents visit restaurants at least once a month, with one in four going to a restaurant every week.
- 90% visit cafés at least once a month, while 73% visit pubs once or more a month.

But these customers don't feel venues are designed with them in mind.

- 79% have left a restaurant, café or pub early because of the noise.
- 76% would dine out more often if venues were quieter.



65-74: 40%

75-84: 14%

85+: 3%

Age range of respondents

Why does background noise matter to people with hearing loss (and many without)?



“Sometimes I just have to say no...”

“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. Nothing puts me off more than the embarrassment of not hearing what the server is asking. They ask what drink I would like and I order the fish. Sometimes I just have to say no to an invitation if it’s to a venue I know is noisy.”

Susan

“It’s no fun making a fuss. But you don’t return!”

“I’m retired, so I know how important it is to have a reason to go out each day. Also, cooking is not exactly my favourite activity! Eating out is the perfect way to catch up with friends, but catching up means that we want to talk and be able to hear each other. It’s no fun complaining and making a fuss, so often you sit in misery. Then, if you do pluck up the courage and your complaint is ignored, you feel embarrassed. But you don’t return! I want to relax and, as a customer, feel I am important to their business.”

Dorothy



What’s causing all this background noise?

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. When a restaurant, café or pub is filled with features like these, the sound waves generated bounce around, creating a loud, echoey environment.

These sound waves would be absorbed by softer materials, such as carpets, tablecloths and curtains, which reduce the reverberation time.



If background music is being played, we walk out...

“It’s not the eating that’s important, but the company. Background music destroys conversations, so if it’s being played, we walk out. When I find a restaurant that I enjoy, I tell the manager how much I enjoyed dining in that environment, due to the lack of music. And I’ll let her or him know that I’ll recommend it to others.”

Alan

Reducing background noise – the business case

Eleven million people in the UK have a hearing loss¹. The prevalence increases with age – 42% of over 50s have hearing loss², the age group which, in 2015, accounted for more than two-thirds of the nation's wealth³. So, doing everything you can to attract and satisfy this sizeable group of customers makes good business sense.

Venues that fail to consider acoustics when deciding on their interior design and working practices risk excluding these customers – regardless of the quality of the food and drink on offer.

Losing revenue

Customer loyalty is crucial to the long-term success of any business, but it's particularly true for cafés, pubs and restaurants, where the customer is paying for the whole experience as well as the product⁴.

Our survey shows that people are leaving venues in droves due to loud noise – and they're not coming back.

While some people may stick it out – for example, if they've booked a table for a long-planned, large family meal – they're unlikely to forget or forgive their stressful experience, and will go somewhere else next time.

- 91% of our survey respondents said they wouldn't return to a restaurant, café or pub if the noise levels were too high.
- 35% write reviews, on websites like TripAdvisor, after dining out.



Eight out of 10

people have left an establishment early because it was too noisy



More than one in four

have received the wrong order when dining out, due to the noisy environment



We always thank the manager if a venue is quiet... and try to keep going back.

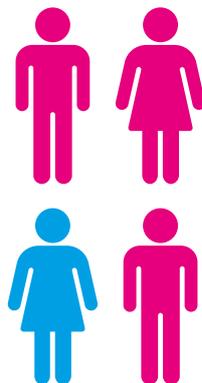
When I go out alone or with my friends, the noise level is the main criterion when deciding where to eat. We've walked out of places that were not congenial in this respect. On the other hand, we always thank the manager if a venue is quiet, and try to keep going back, while always fearing that, next time, we'll find that piped-in music has been added!

Cecilia

How businesses can attract – and keep – customers

Venues that do create a welcoming acoustic environment are likely to reap the benefits.

Studies show that most people choose to eat at restaurants that are good places for socialising⁵. Too much noise detracts from the customer's otherwise positive feelings about the food, drink and service. This leads to customer dissatisfaction, diminished loyalty and a reduced desire to return to the venue in the future⁶.



Three out of every four (76%) respondents said they'd visit more restaurants, cafés and pubs if noise levels were lower

How can restaurants, cafés and pubs reduce background noise?

A venue willing to adapt its practices – and/or interior design – will attract more customers. Many of the adjustments that will help people with hearing loss will also improve the dining/drinking experience for customers without hearing loss.

Consumers have identified three key solutions that will improve their experience in restaurants, cafés and pubs.

Turning background music down (or off!)

Background music is often played to give some ‘atmosphere’. But it can make it hard for people to hold a conversation, and the level of noise shoots up as other customers speak over the music. Turning music down, or off altogether, is the easiest and cheapest way to make a venue quieter and more accessible to Britain’s 11 million people with hearing loss.



My ideal restaurant? Absolutely no music!

My ideal restaurant would be fitted with carpets and curtains to deaden the clattering of cutlery. Tables would have tablecloths. I might also have pictures made with some sort of fabric to absorb the noise from other diners. The staff would speak clearly and loudly, but know that they don't have to shout at me. And there would be absolutely no music!

Marian



Interior design for eyes *and* ears

Adding softer furnishings to your venue (for example, carpets and tablecloths), makes a huge difference – they really do minimise background noise. And other surprisingly simple adjustments will improve things even more – from rubber feet on chair and table legs to acoustic treatments (see box).

For many people with hearing loss, lipreading is a vital communication skill, particularly in noisier environments. A well-lit venue is essential for customers reliant on lipreading, so that they can follow the conversation and communicate effectively.

Finding the quiet and leading customers there

More than half of respondents to our survey said they are keen for cafés, pubs and restaurants to provide ‘quiet areas’. These areas could include:

- tables spaced further apart than usual – and positioned away from noise sources such as doorways and the kitchen
- soft furnishings, from tablecloths, rugs and cushions, through to rubber-capped chair legs.
- a speaker-free zone



Acoustic treatments – improving your acoustics without changing the aesthetic

Acoustic treatments are designed to reduce noise levels, either by absorbing or diffusing sound. 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.

Art panels are types of wall or ceiling panels that you can print on – reproducing an image from a painting or other design – allowing venues to retain their aesthetic appeal at the same time as improving the acoustic environment.

Acoustic treatments can be ‘retrofitted’ within existing venues, or incorporated into new builds.

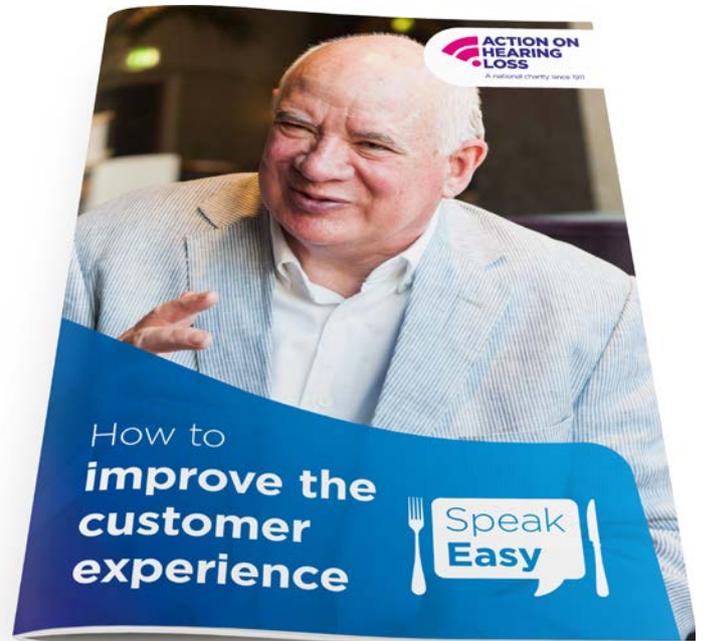
Next steps

If you think your venue may have a noise problem you're keen to address – and you want to become a destination restaurant or bar for the UK's 11 million people with hearing loss – please get in touch.

We'll give you our free guide. This details all the options that will improve the acoustic environment in your restaurant, café or pub.

Then, once you're ready to move forward, we'll work closely with you to pin down the cost-effective changes you can introduce to make your venue accessible – without compromising your brand aesthetics.

We'll also help to promote your establishment's increased accessibility to people with hearing loss – and the wider public.



Find out more about the campaign

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

✉ **Email** **campaigns@hearingloss.org.uk**

☎ **Telephone** **020 7296 8248**

- ¹ Action on Hearing Loss (2015). *Hearing Matters: Why urgent action is needed on deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss across the UK*. Available at: actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/policy-research-and-influencing/research/hearing-matters.aspx
- ² Action on Hearing Loss (2015). *Hearing Matters: Why urgent action is needed on deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss across the UK*. Available at: actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/policy-research-and-influencing/research/hearing-matters.aspx
- ³ Centre for Economics and Business Research (2015). *Wealth among the over-50s*. Available at: cebr.com/reports/wealth-among-the-over-50s/
- ⁴ Raab C, Dina Marie V. Zemke, Jean L. Hertzman and Dipendra Singh (2013). Restaurant Customers' Perceptions of Noise and their Satisfaction and Loyalty Behaviors, *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration*, 14:4, 398–414.
- ⁵ Moschis G, Folkman C, and Bellenger D (2003). Restaurant-selection preferences of mature consumers, *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 51–60.
- ⁶ Raab C, Dina Marie V. Zemke, Jean L. Hertzman and Dipendra Singh (2013). Restaurant Customers' Perceptions of Noise and their Satisfaction and Loyalty Behaviors, *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration*, 14(4), 398–414.



Hearing loss can be so confining, unless you're able to get out there and do something about it. It needs to feature on the agenda for any new development and it either has to be client or consumer-driven. Those of us who have difficulty hearing need to make sure that we say something! It's all there - we just need to find the solution and use it.

Emile Azan, deaf interior designer



If I were to design a restaurant, café or pub, I'd look for an architect specialised in acoustics.

We could then consult, step by step, on all the major design choices.

The finished product would be somewhere that you could walk in and be greeted by the quiet buzz of people conversing - rather than a wall of noise.

Jean



Action on Hearing Loss (formerly RNID) is the largest UK charity helping people who are confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss. We give support and care, develop technology and treatments, and campaign for equality. We enable people to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way. We rely on donations to continue our vital work.

For up-to-date information about hearing loss and tinnitus, how to hear better, and our breakthrough medical research, visit our website: **actiononhearingloss.org.uk**

For free, confidential information about anything related to hearing loss or tinnitus, you can call us on **0808 808 0123**, email us at **information@hearingloss.org.uk** or send a text message to **07800 000360**.

To find out about our events, news and services, and to share experiences and information with others, like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter:

 Action on Hearing Loss

 @ActionOnHearing

On the cover: Marian Callender, from West Yorkshire, wears two hearing aids to manage her hearing loss. She dines out regularly but wishes venues weren't so noisy.

Photography credit: Barry Pells