

## Noise at Work Policy

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### Key messages

The main objective of this policy is to:

- Ensure that the ICO has sufficient arrangements in place to protect staff from excessive noise at work.
- Inform staff of potential sources of excessive noise and how they can protect themselves from them.
- Provide access to resources which can support staff to gauge their hearing levels and access to information and support.

### Does this policy relate to me?

This policy applies to all ICO staff, secondees, and agency staff. The ICO will also protect users of ICO buildings including visitors, consultants and contractors from excessive noise.

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. Excessive noise at work can create a significant hazard for workers. The workplaces provided by the ICO are not, typically, excessively noisy environments. However, we recognise that there are circumstances which must be anticipated and managed effectively, so that people are not exposed to the potential harm which can arise from working in noisy places.
- 1.2. There are several pieces of legislation which impact on this this policy including:
  - [Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)
  - [The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)
  - [The Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://legislation.gov.uk)
- 1.4 This policy and procedure applies to all ICO staff, agency workers, secondees, contractors and visitors to ICO sites.
- 1.5 It is the responsibility of the Facilities and Estates department to ensure that ICO offices operate within tolerable noise levels, and the responsibility of the IT department to ensure that audio equipment can operate effectively within permissible levels.

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## 2. Policy position and purpose

- 2.1 As an employer, the ICO will provide suitable arrangements to limit exposure to loud noise and, where necessary, provide appropriate equipment which helps to reduce the potential for harm to people's hearing.
- 2.2 It is the ICO's policy to ensure noise levels remain below legal exposure levels. This means taking action if daily or weekly personal noise exposure exceeds 80-85 decibels, or where peak sound levels exceed 135 decibels.
- 2.3 Our primary aim is to ensure noise levels remain within acceptable limits and, only if this is not possible, to provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to help prevent damage to people's hearing.
- 2.4 This policy and procedure is intended to:
  - Ensure that the ICO is compliant with relevant legislation;
  - Minimise the risk of injury or harm arising from noise at work;
  - Inform staff how to report concerns about excessive noise;
  - Inform staff about ways in which they can protect their hearing.

## 3. Sources of noise

- 3.1. ICO's work environments are typically well within legal noise tolerance levels.

Legislation requires action when regular noise exceeds 80 or 85 decibels. A daily or weekly average noise level of 80 decibels would require employers to provide specific information and training about noise levels. If the average were to be 85 decibels or more, employers would be required to provide hearing protection.

The decibel scale is logarithmic, an increase of 10 decibels equates to a doubling of perceived noise levels.

The diagram below from the Health and Safety Executive shows examples of sounds and their typical noise levels in decibels.



- 3.2 Noise in ICO offices will typically be in the 40 to 70 decibel range depending on how many people are present. This will be measured periodically to ensure that there has been no unexpected changes in working noise levels.
- 3.3 The greatest potential for excessive noise during normal operations at the ICO is from **audio headsets** having their volume turned up too high. The Health and Safety Executive considers that, in general, call handlers using headsets are unlikely to exceed the 80 decibel lower exposure action level providing good practice in the management of noise is followed.

The ICO will provide headsets and systems which use them which have fully adjustable volume controls. This will enable them to be used at a sound level which is comfortable for the user and protects them from harm.

On ICO laptops volume can be adjusted by clicking on the speaker



icon at the bottom right of the screen, and adjusting the sliding button to an appropriate volume when the settings pop up box appears.

- 3.4 If a headset breaks, or is found not to be adjustable, a new headset can be requested from the Digital and IT Self Service Portal on IRIS, which can be found via this link: [Self-Service Portal \(haloitsm.com\)](https://haloitsm.com)

- 3.5 Ensuring that headsets are at a comfortable noise level is also important as it will enable you to hear other sounds like a fire evacuation alarm, or a smoke alarm if you are working at home.
- 3.6 Staff are allowed to use **personal headphones** and listen to music whilst they are working if this helps them to concentrate. Sound levels should be comfortable, enable you to hear fire alarms and not interfere with your work. The sound from your headphones must not be audible to colleagues, as this can cause a distraction to others.

Prolonged exposure to loud music through headphones can cause harm to hearing. Headphones on sale in Europe are restricted to a maximum output of 100 decibels when used with a mobile handset. At this level the maximum exposure is only between 15 and 30 minutes in any 24 hour period, and so it is unsafe to listen at maximum volume. You must therefore be mindful to keep the volume at a safe level.

Care should also be taken if you wear headphones whilst travelling for work. The volume should be set at a level which enables you to maintain situational awareness, for example being aware of traffic and factors which may affect your personal safety.

- 3.7 Other sources of noise in the office may come from the operation of machinery such as printers/copiers, franking machines and vacuum cleaners. The noise from these pieces of equipment is generally short term or intermittent, and not of a level which will require additional noise management.
- 3.8 There may be occasions where noise from building work taking place in, or close by, to our offices has the potential to cause distraction or distress. Where possible, noisy activity will be kept to a minimum in working hours, and sources of noise separated from core ICO areas of work. If necessary, hearing protection will be made available to those who may be affected.
- 3.9 If you are concerned that any of our workplaces, or items of equipment are excessively noisy and may be harmful to hearing, you should email [healthandsafety@ico.org.uk](mailto:healthandsafety@ico.org.uk) for advice.

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## 4. Hearing checks

- 4.1 The noise levels present at ICO offices are not of a level which requires health surveillance or hearing checks.
- 4.2 There are many resources available on the internet which provide advice about noise, and even provide online hearing tests such as: [Hearing test - 3 minutes, free, online, easy and reliable | RNID](#)
- [Free Online Hearing Test | Specsavers UK](#)

## Feedback on this document

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## Version history

Version	Changes made	Date	Made by
1.0	New policy	May 2023	Mike Collins

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