

Second Opinion

Jacky Jones



Paraglider that sounded like 100 chainsaws shattered the silence

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It can be hard to be physically active at this time of year but walking by the sea in Galway is an easily made health choice. The promenade from the Claddagh to the lighthouse on Mutton Island is one of the few places left in the city where citizens can walk without being deafened by traffic noise.

Last week the usual peace was shattered by a powered paraglider which sounded like 100 chainsaws and continued for an hour. The man on the paraglider waved delightedly to the walkers below, oblivious to the effect of his hobby on other people.

When contacted, Galway City Council did not know whether paragliding was banned or not, or what could be done about it. Paragliders are just one example of insidious noise pollution.

Mobile phones, faulty alarms and ear-splitting sirens on emergency vehicles (definitely louder than they used to be) are also noise pollutants. Lynne Truss's book, *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life (or six good reasons to stay home and bolt the door)* explores "our insane levels of self-absorption, my bubble, my rules", particularly when it comes to mobile phones and other noise-polluting gadgets. Train and bus users shout into their phones for hours on end. Most pubs and restaurants play loud music, mainly for the benefit of staff, not customers. It is becoming impossible to find quiet spaces to think and relax.



Growing problem

Noise pollution is a huge and growing problem all over Europe. Transport and industry are the main sources of noise and long-term exposure damages human health and adversely affects ecosystems. A 2011 report, *The Burden of Disease from Environmental Noise: Quantification of healthy life years lost in Europe*, from the World Health Organisation, estimates that "at least one million healthy life years are lost every year from traffic-related noise in the western part of Europe". It is the second-worst environmental cause of ill health. Specific effects include high blood pressure, chronic disease, cognitive impairment, sleep disturbance, and tinnitus. Noise adversely affects wildlife (species richness, reproductive success, and population size) and animal behaviour. Loss of biodiversity leads to a vicious circle of habitat destruction, fewer people visiting quiet places, and places becoming derelict. Then the developers move in.

The Environmental Noise Regulations 2006 gave effect to the 2002 EU Environmental Noise Directive (END) and local authorities must have an action plan to monitor noise, inform and consult the

■ The promenade from the Claddagh to the lighthouse on Mutton Island is one of the few places left in Galway city where citizens can walk without hearing traffic noise.

PHOTOGRAPH: JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY

public, and address local noise issues. There is little evidence on the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government website to show that this is happening other than to say "noise nuisance caused by neighbours makes up the vast majority of noise complaints in Ireland".

We are probably not complaining about powered paragliders flying over quiet promenades: If we do complain, there does not seem to be a lot local authorities will do about it, even though legislation "prohibits the use of vehicles which cause any excessive noise in a public place".

On-the-spot fines

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to take further steps to address noise pollution, including the introduction of on-the-spot fines. The department's press office cannot say when this new legislation will be published because of other legislative priorities.

In 2014, the European Environment Agency published a *Good Practice Guide on Quiet Areas*. Such areas are not completely silent but are undisturbed by

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harmful outdoor sounds created by human activities, such as traffic and industry. Bird song, the rustle of leaves, and other natural sounds, including children playing, should not be drowned out by man-made noise.

Dublin City Council received ministerial approval in July 2013 to designate eight green spaces as quiet areas, including Ranelagh Gardens and Palmerstown Park.

Designation means these spaces will be preserved as quiet areas or places where exposure to noise will not get any worse.

Green areas

Why not make 2015 the year for using quiet places to relax, think, walk, run, cycle and picnic? Most of us know where these are. Access to calm green areas improves wellbeing. Inhabitants of quiet areas do not suffer the negative health effects of noise and visitors to these quiet areas also benefit. Users of quiet places can complain to the local authority if their peace is shattered by man-made noise. A public information leaflet, *A Guide to the Noise Regulation*, outlining the legal avenues available to people experiencing noise nuisance, is available on the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government's website at the following link: iti.ms/1yEAI6.

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