



Noise Protection Policy and Guidance

INTRODUCTION

The Noise at Work Regulations 1989 apply to all workplaces and require employers to carry out assessments of the noise levels within their premises and take appropriate preventative action where necessary.

MAIN PROVISIONS OF THE 1989 REGULATIONS

Scope

Employers and the self-employed are required to safeguard both their own employees and other workers not employed by them who are exposed to noise from their activities. The employers of those workers will themselves have duties to protect them and the guidance document explains what action such employers should take in circumstances where the actual exposure is under the control of another employer.

Action Levels

Three 'action levels' are defined. The first action level establishes a daily personal noise exposure of 86dB(A) and the second action level establishes a daily personal noise exposure of 90dB(A). 'Daily personal noise exposure' is the total exposure over the whole working day, taking into account the varying noise levels in the working environment and how long a person is exposed to them. In calculating the level no account is taken of any ear protectors being worn.

The third defined level is a peak action level of 200 pascals (equivalent to 140dB) and is likely to be linked with the use of cartridge operated tools, shooting guns and similar loud explosive noises. This action level is most likely to be important where workers are subject to a small number of loud impulses during an otherwise quiet day.

Irrespective of action levels, every employer is required to reduce the risk of damage to the hearing of employees from exposure to noise to the lowest level reasonably practicable.

Exposure Assessments

Employers are required to make adequate arrangements for the assessment of exposure, where this is likely to be at or above either the first or peak action levels. The assessments should be made by a 'competent person' who should be able to advise on any action needed to comply with other requirements of the Regulations or on the need for further specialist advice.

Noise assessments must be reviewed when there has either been a significant change in work to which the assessment relates or wherever there is reason to suspect that the assessment is no longer valid. Employers must ensure that an adequate record of the assessment and/or any review is kept.

Reduction of Noise Exposure

Where daily noise exposure is likely to be at or above the second or peak action levels employers are required to ensure that exposure is reduced to the lowest level reasonably practicable other than by the provision of ear protectors.

Ear Protection

Where employees are likely to be exposed to the first action level or above in circumstances where the daily personal noise exposure is likely to be less than 90dB(A), suitable and efficient personal ear protectors are to be made available to those who request them.

For exposures at or above the second or peak action levels suitable ear protectors must be provided which when properly worn can be reasonably expected to reduce the risk of hearing damage to below that caused by an unprotected exposure at these levels.

Ear Protection Zones

Every employer must designate any part of his premises where employees are likely to be exposed to the second action level or above, or to the peak action level or above as an 'ear protection zone'. Every ear protection zone should be demarcated and identified by means of the appropriate sign. The sign should include text indicating that this is an ear protection zone and that all personnel must wear personal ear protectors whilst in the zone.

Maintenance and Use of Equipment

All employers must take all reasonable steps to ensure that anything they are obliged to provide is maintained in an efficient state, in efficient working order, in good repair and is properly used. The employer is not obliged to ensure the use of ear protectors below the second or peak action levels.

Employees' Duties

Every employee shall so far as is reasonably practicable, make full and proper use of anything, including ear protectors which the employer is required to provide, except for ear protectors provided on request to those who are exposed below the second or peak action levels. Any defects in equipment provided should be reported to the employer.

Provision of Information to Employees

Every employer must provide employees who are likely to be exposed to the first or peak action levels or above with adequate information, instruction and training on:-

- (a) the risk of hearing damage that exposure may cause
- (b) possible actions to minimise that risk
- (c) steps to be taken by employees in order to obtain personal ear protection
- (d) employees' obligations.

Protective Equipment

There are four main ways of limiting or controlling noise:-

- (a) reduction of noise at source
- (b) isolation of the source of noise
- (c) ear protection for workers at risk
- (d) reduction of time to which personnel are exposed to noise.

All possible measures should be taken to ensure noise control at source. However, should it prove impossible or impracticable to reduce noise levels to within safe limits, then it is necessary to supply exposed workers with some personal form of hearing protection to deal with the noise.

Three forms of hearing protection equipment are available:-

- (a) ear plugs
- (b) ear muffs
- (c) helmets.

Each form of protection has its own specific characteristics. However, all types should provide effective noise attenuation, be comfortable and safe to use, be aesthetically acceptable, not provoke a toxic reaction in the wearer and not impair speech communication.