

(Readers please note, there are two separate email chains here. The first to Avon and Somerset Police and Bath Council I wrote on behalf of a tourist visiting the city of Bath – a Vic Hitchens. Both chains are in reverse date order.)

Dear Mr Hitchens,

Sirens are used by all emergency services and are a safety measure to alert drivers and pedestrians to an approaching emergency vehicle. The use of police vehicles having and using sirens across all of the country have been approved by the Police Crime Commissioners in each force, including Avon & Somerset Constabulary.

If you wish to make a formal complaint in regards to a police vehicle utilising its siren as passing you in the street you will need to follow the complaint procedure detailed below.

http://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/units_and_departments/professional-standards/

Kind Regards,

Avon and Somerset Police

Force Service Centre

Dear FSC,

It seems to me that your stated reason for having "four different tones" is perhaps based on some scientific research. Do you have chapter and verse on this?

From what I have experienced in Bath, your "acclimatisation" argument is not related to real events. Passing the Guildhall/Waitrose areas (on two successive days actually) immediately after switching on the siren, the driver (or is this automatic) switched from 1 to 2 to 3 to 4; this all happened within a few seconds. Acclimatisation can only, surely, normally take place after quite some time (many minutes).

As a driver with 50 years experience, much on the continent as I worked abroad for 20 years, I have found sirens quite worthless. One never knows, until the emergency vehicle is actually seen (with flashing headlights or blue lights or whatever) from where the siren noise is coming. Sirens just have the effect of creating disturbance and perhaps a little panic in some. See the Noise Abatement Society webpage on this subject which talks about broadband/white sound technology (whatever that may be); the webpage also talks about sirens causing chaos and confusion:

<http://noiseabatementociety.com/campaigns/emergency-vehicle-sirens/>

In addition, 'hard start' sirens are quite dangerous. I was walking along a Bath street when a siren started up right behind me without warning (this is what prompted my email); for people with dicky hearts (like myself) and others, perhaps in frail health, this is pretty hazardous.

Most French cities have by-laws limiting the use of sirens realising that they are detrimental to the environment and the wellbeing of residents and visitors alike. Bath should do the same.

Yours

Vic H

Dear Vic,

Thank you for your email,

The four different tones are used by all emergency services and are a safety measure to alert drivers and pedestrians to an approaching emergency vehicle. If changing tones are not used members of the public can acclimatise to that tone and fail to realise an emergency vehicle is approaching.

Additionally if the tones are less loud people are also unaware that an emergent vehicle is coming. As emergency vehicles approach so fast the sirens have to be that loud in order to give other drivers enough time to react and move out of the way. A large amount of research into the safest volumes and tones has been conducted by emergency services. Current tone rotations and volumes are the safest way to avoid crashes involving emergency service vehicles which are a very real danger for personnel driving on emergency response runs.

Many Thanks

Avon and Somerset Police

Force Service Centre

All,

A year on, more blackberries and more sirens in the depths of the Wiltshire countryside, miles (well kilometres anyway) away from the nearest road at Collett's Bottom, Weavern and Weavern Lane. Sirens at 10:20 and 1150 (also later at 16:45 and 17:15) - perhaps there were more but I had a siesta (benefits of retirement).

There are, of course, (what I consider to be unnecessarily loud) sirens throughout the day on most days but being miles away from civilization emphasises that they are far too loud.

No response required.

Paul Turner
details as last year

From: wirepuller@hotmail.com
To: jamesgraymp@parliament.uk
CC: n_a_s@btconnect.com; info@noise-abatement.org; kim.birch@gwas.nhs.uk;
corshamnorthnpt@wiltshire.pnn.police.uk
Subject: FW: Emergency Vehicle Sirens
Date: Wed, 21 Sep 2011 23:33:28 +0000

James,

As you requested, please find the response from the Noise Abatement Society about the curse of UK emergency vehicle sirens. Their response is interesting and informative but has not addressed my point regarding the use of the tried and tested, easy-on-the-ear continental-type sirens. Why jump through hoops and wait years looking for new technologies when there is a working old technology on our doorstep? I guess that we prefer to emulate the excessive drama provided by America-type sirens than to follow the civilized example of our European neighbours?

Last week, her majesty and myself took advantage of a sunny day or two and wandered across the Bybrook Valley to Weavern Lane to pick blackberries. We were immersed in the sights and sounds of a bit of late English summer - cries of buzzards circling overhead, the occasional caw from the browsing crows, the rustle of drying leaves in the breeze, the footfall of a lone jogger on a round-trip from Biddestone and then, across from the A4 at Pickwick, through Middlehill and Colletts Bottom, the wailing and yelping of those bloody emergency vehicle sirens. Is this not only the curse of the present but what the future holds for us - unable to escape from incessant, piercing, penetrating, cacophonous, unnecessary sirens?

As the NAS states in its response below: "This noise is totally unnecessarily excessive and the NAS will continue to put pressure in every quarter that it can to bring about some rational thinking on this question.". Can you bring any pressure to bear in government circles?

Sincerely

Paul Turner

From: help@noise-abatement.org
To: wirepuller@hotmail.com
Subject: Emergency Vehicle Sirens
Date: Mon, 19 Sep 2011 11:05:00 +0100

Dear Mr Turner

We completely identify with your siren noise problem and thank you for your recent emails. Please accept our sincere apologies for the delay in responding to you and please also accept our apologies for the confusing wording on our website which, as a result of your enquiry, we have now changed. The intended meaning of 'managed by behavioural concessions' is that the local emergency service regulatory bodies think that sounding the sirens is being managed by the drivers taking control and not sounding the sirens when unnecessary.

As you know, one of the Noise Abatement Society's current campaigns is to look at the unnecessarily loud noise generated in urban streets by emergency service sirens: if somebody is washing up in their flat overlooking the high street, they are not in danger of being run over by a police car on emergency call-out, so do not need to hear that siren noise.

The only people who should hear that alarm are those who are directly in front of the speeding car, or in the closest proximity, in order to warn them of impending doom.

There are many points to this problem which we have been looking into over the past couple of years:

1) The over-use of these sirens engenders a negative feeling of anxiety in residents and pedestrians because they conclude that the surrounding area is crime or disaster-ridden. This is generally not the case. Multiply this and it is a quality of life issue.

The Metropolitan Police have been reported saying that they are concerned about this, which is quite a shift in thinking.

2) There is presently no standard for the maximum decibel sound of emergency service sirens. Each County Police, Fire and Ambulance Service are free to use whatever means of alarm they choose, which accounts for the variety of sounds that are currently heard. Most sirens are pure tone, and not easily detectable, so confusing the hearer which causes accidents because the victim may not look in the right direction.

Addressing this point, last November, the Noise Abatement Society, through the British Standards Institute, presented a new work item proposal to the ISO plenary meeting in Korea, to find an international benchmark for emergency service sirens that would be directional, therefore safer, non-dissipational, so not being heard too much by residents and less intrusive to the ear, thus allowing people to react in a calm way. The answer currently exists in the form of Broadband sound which

satisfies all the aforementioned properties. It may take many years for a standard to emerge, however, it does serve as a strong platform from which to argue the case for change meantime.

3) It is a very difficult subject to raise through the media because the sympathy lies with the emergency service personnel who are doing a grand job and just carrying out their very important duties, which is why you may not be receiving much sympathy from your Local Authority.

4) However, the personnel inside these vehicles do suffer from the loud noise generated just above their heads, and this noise pressure can affect concentration and some suffer and take sick leave as a result of constant exposure to this excessively loud noise. The shrill sound is not conducive to recovery for a patient inside an ambulance, either.

5) Research needs to be carried out to prove my last two points, but anecdotal evidence exists and common sense points to this being the case.

The NAS is raising this issue everywhere it can in Government as we receive many calls on our helpline from exasperated residents like yourself. This noise is totally unnecessarily excessive and the NAS will continue to put pressure in every quarter that it can to bring about some rational thinking on this question.

We suggest you to write to your Local Councillors, your local MP and to your local emergency service providers, including the above points.

But before you do this, try to find out if there are others who feel the same way that you do about noisy sirens because this evidence from a number of residents being disturbed will add weight to your argument.

Would you be kind enough to continue to copy us in on your correspondence and ask any other residents to do the same? This is important evidence which can be used to lobby Government.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Emma Parker | Noise Abatement Society

Dear NAS,

Regarding your Emergency Vehicle Sirens Campaign, even here in the rural Wiltshire, there is a daily diet of wailing and yelping (why two - to increase the annoyance factor?) sirens usually from ambulances in our case. I have experienced London police sirens regularly - I used to stay in a London hotel close to Waterloo station on Sunday nights over many years. Arriving at 10pm,

I usually counted about a dozen sirens before dropping off. Surely there cannot be such an incidence of serious local emergencies on such a regular basis and, as you point out, the UK sirens just put everyone on edge giving a sense of unease about the place.

I have made my feelings known to the local ambulance service on a number of occasions. When walking in the country, is it necessary for me to hear sirens from miles away (usually on the A4 which passes through this neck of the woods)? I recall, at the winter solstice last year I was walking down a snow- and ice-covered lane blessed with total silence and thinking that I could be in Victorian England when the sound of silence was replaced by the sound of sirens. On a Sunday morning earlier this year, my wife and I were waiting to catch a train at Chippenham station and listening to the bells of the local church, St Paul's, when siren after siren after siren disturbed the Sunday morning peace. We had just driven to the station and the roads were empty.

Our American-type sirens are downright dangerous. On a number of occasions, I have experienced one of these sirens starting up just behind me with no warning; I have also seen their effect on others. The sirens are so loud that they give a tremendous shock to the system and for people with health problems (for example, heart conditions) this could have serious effects.

In France and Germany, where health outcomes for most, if not all, illnesses and associated emergencies are far better than ours, the old (*Inspector Maigret*) 'dee-dah' sirens are still used and these are much easier on the ear. I have just returned from 10 days in the south of France; in Montpellier (pop. 250,000), as I indicated, the dee-dah sirens were quite comfortable to live with; actually very few were heard for such a large city and it was noticeable that their use, presumably by order, was quickly curtailed by the operator/driver (unlike the UK, where operators appear to delight in overuse - I guess imitating TV dramas and fly-on-the-wall police 'documentaries').

What on Earth does your: "Regulatory bodies currently see no need to change from existing technology as they feel that the noise pollution element is being managed via behavioural concessions." mean? This sounds like meaningless baloney! Who are the regulatory bodies by the way? Rather than 'white noise', why can't we (you!) push for simple, easy-on-the-ear, restricted-use continental-style sirens (remember, continental health outcomes are better than ours!)? I recall the old Commercial Union TV ad with the slogan: "We won't make a drama out of a crisis" - our 'regulatory bodies' seem hell-bent on doing just the opposite - American style!

Yours sincerely

Paul Turner