

**MINUTES OF THE 9TH MEETING OF THE ENGINEERING INDUSTRY
NOISE TASK GROUP (EINTG) ON 22 JANUARY 2002 AT EEF WEST
MIDLANDS, ST JAMES'S HOUSE, BIRMINGHAM**

ATTENDEES

John Hustwick – Industrial Noise & Vibration Centre
Martin Bevan – General Municipal Boilermakers & Allied Trades Union
Colin Holdhusen – Corus UK
David Powell – Association of British Insurers
Tony Romaniuk – Motor Industry Safety Group
Matt Albutt – Metalforming Machinery Makers Association
Alan Robson – Confederation of Shipbuilding & Engineering Unions
Tony McCarthy – National Union of Domestic Appliances and General Operatives
David Allison – Marine Painting Forum
Bob Taylor – British Turned Parts Manufacturers' Association
Gary Booton – Engineering Employers' Federation (EEF) (Chairman)
Bob Hanlon – EEF West Midlands
Jeane Anderson – Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Health Directorate
Rebecca Hathaway – HSE Health Directorate
Tim Ward – HSE Technology Directorate
Marjory Mitchell – HSE Health Unit
Graham Watson – HSE (Secretary) Engineering and Utilities Sector

APOLOGIES

Ivan Hoff – Thermal Spraying & Surface Engineering Association
Dr Stoneman – Fluid & Acoustic Services
Richard Griffiths – Machine Tool Technologies Association
Mr R Brown – Federation of British Engineers' Tool Manufacturers
Peter Wilson – Industrial Noise and Vibration Centre

INTRODUCTIONS

Those present introduced themselves and the organisations they represent. Martin Bevan, David Allison, Marjory Mitchell and Rebecca Hathaway were welcomed to their first meeting. Marjory Mitchell explained that she worked for HSE'S Health Unit in Edinburgh, which acts as a link between HSE's operational staff and the Health Directorate (HD). Rebecca Hathaway also explained that she was new to HD's Physical Agents Policy Unit and was attending the meeting to familiarise herself with the work of the unit.

MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the last meeting were read and accepted as a true record.

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE LAST MINUTES NOT ON THE AGENDA

There were no such matters.

EINTG MEMBERSHIP

Graham Watson had received correspondence from Geoff Field stating that at the end of January he was to be leaving the Confederation of British Metalforming (cbm) to become the Chief Executive of the British Jewellers' Association. As at this stage Geoff did not believe the Jewellery Industry to have a noise problem he was resigning from the Task Group. Geoff was thanked on behalf of the Task Group for all his help and in particular for helping to draft the Task Group's initial leaflet. Until Geoff's replacement is appointed, the contact at the cbm is Geoff's ex-line manager Mr Neil Marshall. Gary Booton queried whether a reply had been received from the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) indicating whether or not they were interested in becoming involved in the work of the Task Group. Graham stated that the decision was to be made by the RNID's chief executive and that he was yet to receive a reply from them, he would though follow this up.

Action: Graham Watson

The contact details for Colin Holdhusen on the Task Group Membership list were incorrect. The correct details are shown on the enclosed spreadsheet (Document 1) to be e-mailed to all Task Group members who have provided an e-mail address. The spreadsheet also contains the contact details of new members. John Hustwick raised a concern that the contact details for INVC were missing from a membership list that Peter Wilson had seen. Graham Watson agreed to look into this. Update: the INVC details are missing from the membership list attached to the Engineering and Utilities Sector Information Minute (SIM) bringing the work of the Task Group to the attention of HSE Inspectors. The purpose of attaching the membership list to the SIM was solely to highlight the broad base of the Task Group's membership. The list as attached to the SIM is in any case already out of date. The INVC details are however contained in the enclosed spreadsheet, which is a working document and will be kept up-to-date.

HAND-ARM VIBRATION (HAV)

Graham Watson introduced the subject of HAV, highlighting the common areas between HAV and noise. Noise problems and HAV problems often have common solutions. The Physical Agents Directive also applies to HAV (and whole body vibration) as well as to noise. Tim Ward provided a summary of how the Directive affects HAV. As a result of the Directive there will for the first time be Regulations relating specifically to HAV, which will give HSE Inspectors something to inspect and enforce against. The Physical Agents (Vibration) Directive is similar to the Physical Agents (Noise) Directive in that it sets new action values, a lower action value of 2.5 ms^2 and an upper action value of 5 ms^2 . However, as HAV is to be measured on 3 axes rather than the dominant axes as at present, the new proposed levels are actually lower than when compared to existing action levels when measured using the current method. For example the action value of 5 ms^2 equates to approximately 2.8 ms^2 when measured using just the dominant axes. While people need to be aware the Regulations are coming there is no cause for panic, if people are following the current guidance they should probably be all right.

Jeane Anderson explained that the Directive has still to be adopted and will not have to be implemented until 3 years after this takes place. While the HSE is fairly happy with what it proposed in relation to HAV this is not the case with whole body vibration due to possible concerns regarding the scientific evidence upon which it is based.

Tony McCarthy asked whether the Physical Agents HAV Directive refers to specific tools such as fettling tools. Tim Ward advised that it does not, the duty being to control exposure to HAV regardless of the type of tool used. Employers just need to ensure that the tools used are safe. HSE is currently running parallel enforcement on tool suppliers to get them to produce tools that have lower vibration levels, as unless employers have access to such tools it can be difficult for them to control the risks. David Allison referred to the need for tool manufacturers to supply users with more information than they do at present. Tim stated that one of the main problems with manufacturers' data is that it does not necessarily relate to the work that the tool will actually be used for. David Allison mentioned however, that unless users do their own testing they will have to rely on the data manufacturers supply. There is however, a duty on employers to assess the risk, which may mean that they have to do their own measurements. Colin Holdhusen stated that in such situations employers may not always have to do their own measurements as they may be able to refer to vibration data supplied by HSE, for example as detailed on a Foundry Information Sheet. Tony Romaniuk referred to the problem of tools not always being balanced, which can adversely affect vibration levels. Tim stated though that there was a duty on employers to ensure that their tools were properly maintained.

Alan Robson expressed intrigue with regards to whole body vibration levels especially in relation to rail travel for example. Tim Ward said that while the Physical Agents Directive told you how to do the measurements it did not contain much information on what to do with the levels or their significance. Gary Booton stated that whole body vibration was a very contentious issue and that there was still scope for movement. Gary felt that hand-arm vibration and noise went hand in hand with each other and that it was worth keeping an eye on hand-arm vibration especially when moving towards the implementation of the Directive. He also referred to research the Faculty of Occupational Medicine is doing which is similar to that involved in "Back in work". They are producing a hand-arm vibration project, which the EEF is financing. In 18 months time it should result in the tools required to manage hand-arm vibration in the workplace, including technical data for medics.

The discussion on hand-arm vibration was concluded by members agreeing that where there are close links between hand-arm vibration and noise, it would be appropriate for the task group to address both issues however it was not felt necessary for hand-arm vibration to be included in the Task Group's terms of reference as an issue in its own right.

PHYSICAL AGENTS (NOISE) DIRECTIVE

Jeane Anderson explained the situation regarding the Rapporteur's report (circulated with the meetings agenda), which recommends changes to the Directive. The HSE does not accept the recommendations that have been made and has sent information to UK MEPs explaining the concerns that it has and what it feels would be the

implications if the recommendations were adopted. The HSE has also produced a briefing tool for other organisations to use to lobby their MEP to try and retain the common position. Stephen Hughes MEP, has already suggested that the European Parliament has got it wrong with some of the proposed amendments and that there was scope for manouver. A copy of the Cost Benefit analysis of implementing the Directive was circulated (Document 2, enclosed for members not at the meeting). This has now been passed to the Minister and so may be freely circulated.

David Allison said that lobbying can be expensive and that when lobbying on the Biocidal Products Directive the Marine Painting Forum used a lobbying organisation in Brussels, which proved advantageous. Jeane Anderson explained however, that the HSE can supply details of the relevant contacts in Brussels, which can help to avoid the need to use such intermediaries.

While a common position was reached by all 15 members states there is a problem in that other member states generally lobby less than the UK. This does not mean that they are happy with the proposed amendments but simply reflects different attitudes towards lobbying. As a result the Rapporteur has stated that it is only the UK that is complaining about the proposals that she has made, there is therefore a need to get other European organisations to lobby. David Allison said some of the members of the Marine Painting Forum are European and that they may be interested in lobbying, he therefore asked if there were some details that he could send to them. Jeane Anderson agreed to send him a brief containing the relevant information.

Action: Jeane Anderson

Gary Booton felt this was an issue that needs to be raised, many companies felt comfortable with the common position. It is therefore important that people know what the Rapporteur has proposed. The EEF are members of WEM, while a number of the member organisations are now taking action in relation to the Directive there is a problem in some member states such as Germany that have very low action levels for noise. However, while such countries do not actually enforce the action levels they make lobbying difficult. In the UK the action levels are a legal requirement enforced by criminal law, whereas in Europe it is a civil matter. The Rapporteur's recommendations are due to be discussed by the European Parliament on 18/19 February. Liz Lyn has produced a paper with some recommendations, which Gary will circulate.

Action: Gary Booton

Gary Booton expressed a need to see if the Task Group has a common position regarding the Directive. He circulated a document (Document 3, enclosed for members not at the meeting) detailing the EEF's view of the Directive. The EEF supports the common position; while it finds it challenging it is something it can live with. However, if the Rapporteur's recommendations are adopted Gary believed it would no longer be possible to operate a press shop. Tony Romaniuk stated that at the Vauxhall plant they have 3 isolated pockets of aggressive noise caused not by machinery but by the process and that there was no way of overcoming it except for using ear protection.

David Allison queried whether the impact assessment of the Directive took account of the earlier period when the wearing of ear protection was not enforced in the same way as it is now, this having a knock on effect on the number of cases of noise induced deafness. Jeane Anderson was not sure; HSE Economists produced the report although she expected that this would have been taken into account. Tony McCarthy referred to the massive decline in claims for noise-induced deafness reflecting the increased use of ear protection. Tim Ward mentioned the problems involved in using DSS claims data as an indicator of the extent of noise induced deafness, the point at which a person becomes eligible for payment representing a considerable loss of hearing. He therefore agreed that the number of civil claims made for noise-induced deafness was a better indicator of the extent of the condition.

Bob Taylor queried whether there was anything in the Directive relating to the need for hearing tests, Tim Ward replied that there was. John Hustwick referred to a case whereby audiometry had been carried out in a firm but they had not been supplied with any follow up. Tim said that there was no point in having audiometry undertaken unless the employer is provided with the results, as this data was essential in assisting the employer to protect their employees' hearing.

Tim Ward distributed a brief highlighting the main requirements of the Directive (Document 4, enclosed for members not at the meeting). This details the upper action value of 85dB(A), the lower action value of 80 dB(A) and the exposure limit value of 87 dB(A). Tim felt that the exposure limit would continue to take into account the wearing of ear protection despite the recommendation by the Rapporteur that it should not. The Directive is structured and follows a pattern that involves determining what employees' daily and weekly noise exposures are and then determining what action needs to be taken. Article 10 talks about health surveillance, which is to be provided according to risk. If people are exposed to 85 dB(A) or above they will need their hearing checked. What constitutes a hearing check is not defined, employers will therefore have to seek the advice of medical people on this issue. Currently hearing checks are recommended at 90 dB(A) and are insisted on at 95 dB(A). Gary Booton asked what the position was regarding who is to do the hearing checks. Tim replied that the Directive states that hearing checks need to be under the overall supervision of a Doctor although the person actually undertaking the checks does not need to be medically qualified. Tim then referred to Article 8 which requires employees and their representatives to be involved, employers will therefore have to speak to those exposed to noise at or above the action and limit values.

Tim referred to the middle column of Document 4, if an employer decides that he has to take action they have to follow a hierarchy of measures, the first step of which is to eliminate the risk. This reflects the general hierarchy of control established by the Framework Directive, which involves taking measures to protect groups of people rather than individuals. If noise exposure is 85 dB(A) or above employers have a duty to reduce noise exposure, this they have to do by using noise enclosures and other noise control measures. In effect this is similar to the current requirements under the Noise at Work Regulations except that the action level is different. Other measures which will also have to be taken include the demarcation of ear protection zones and restricting access to such areas where justified. David Allison referred to practical difficulties involved in doing so in shipyards due to the transient nature of the risk and the many routes of access. Tim said that this was no different from the current

position. Alan Robson felt that shipbuilding was no different from other industries and should adopt things as they are. John Hustwick referred to other practical problems encountered in shipbuilding and repairing including areas of very high short term noise caused for example by shot blasting, this can present difficulties with demarking ear protection zones etc. Tim said that there was a need for shipyards to address such problems by taking appropriate action. Martin Bevan expressed the importance of consulting with employees. Alan Robson stated that when there was a large influx of claims in the 1970s the shipyards applied themselves to ensure the mandatory wearing of ear protectors. Nowadays when shot blasting, all non-essential employees are removed from the area to control the risk. He felt a common sense approach should be applied across all industry with no exceptions.

Moving on from the above discussion Tim Ward stated that under the Directive employers should only rely on ear protectors when they have done all that they can to reduce noise. At 80 dB(A) ear protectors are to be made available although their use will only have to be enforced at 85 dB(A) or above. However, if employers wish to they can enforce the use of ear protectors at lower levels. Tim again emphasised that ear protectors should only be considered once everything has been done that can be done to reduce the level of noise exposure by other means. Where ear protection is to be provided it will have to be capable of bringing exposure to below the higher action level. There will be a derogation for people exposed to a high risk as a result of wearing ear protectors. The HSE will however, only grant such a derogation where employers can demonstrate the risk and that they are controlling the risk from noise by other means.

John Hustwick queried what the knock on effect will be of people saying that they were only required to wear ear protectors when the Directive was implemented but not before. The inference being that if there is a known concern about exposure to noise at or above 85 dB(A) how can the delay in requiring action to address this risk be justified, there being three years until the Directive has to be implemented. Jeane Anderson stated however, that a lot of companies on finding out about the Directive's requirements have already started to require their employees to wear ear protectors at 85 dB(A). Martin Bevan felt that the use of ear protection should be enforced by discussion and that the point of knowledge will be when the law is implemented. Gary Booton agreed, however he felt there was a need to educate people on the fact that things are changing and that there should be a gradual rather than a steep change. Tim Ward explained that employers on their own cannot be expected to know when there will be a risk, as in such a situation they rely on the advice of the enforcing authorities. Tony McCarthy felt he could see a test case coming which would determine when the point of knowledge is/was.

Referring back to document 4 Tim Ward said that if the employer has assessed the risk and controlled it, mopping up any residual risk through the use of ear protectors, the next step is for the employer to check themselves against the limit value. If they are above 87 dB(A) (taking account of ear protection) they need to go back and re-assess what more they have to do. Many people believe they will be able to circumvent the law when the Directive is implemented, by just giving out ear protection to get people below 87 dB(A). However, this is not what will be allowed as the Directive requires employers to go through all stages, 87 dB(A) is not the headline figure 85 dB(A) is and it will not be possible to short circuit the Directive's

requirements. If the Directive is followed people should be below 87 dB(A) unless they have a very high noise level to start off with. John Hustwick queried why the Directive had 2 limits as it would be simpler for some the INVC's clients to adopt 85 dB(A) as the limit. Tim explained that the 80 dB(A) value by acting as an early warning will provide a margin of safety. Jeane Anderson said that she would look into this to see if there was any further background information.

Action: Jeane Anderson

Martin Bevan queried whether there was anything in the Directive requiring employers to continually try and reduce the risk. Tim said that there was in that under the Directive employers will need to keep noise under continuous assessment as do the current Noise at Work Regulations. As the action values are based on an 8-hour exposure Bob Hanlon highlighted what the effect would be of a person working for more than 8 hours. Tim confirmed that this would result in a lowering of the action values for example, for a person working 12 hours the action values will reduce from 85 dB(A) to 83 dB(A) and from 80 dB(A) to 78 dB(A). However, an employer will need to carry out a noise assessment to identify exactly what the action values should be. David Allison felt that the way the Directive was worded implied that an employer will have responsibility for their employees' noise exposure arising from non-work activities. Tim said that this was not the case, employers will not be responsible for noise exposure outside of their control although they will need to take account of that exposure to determine whether or not it is relevant.

Gary Booton asked those present if they wanted the Task Group to have a position of its own in relation to the Directive or whether they were happy to have their own opinion. Alan Robson stated that as he represented those exposed to noise he could not argue against standards improving although he did appreciate that there was a need for sensibility. The CSEU reserved their position to make their own representations to MEPs. He also felt that a lot of what the Directive proposes already applies in Europe and what is good for them is good for the UK. Martin Bevan said that the GMB needs to take their members into account and that he could see no point in having a Directive which introduced no actual changes. Other member also expressed the view that they did not want to see the work of the Task Group undermined. Graham Watson also stated that he felt that lobbying was out with the Task Group's remit. He also referred to the letter received from Ian Watson of S.N.V. Consultants circulated with the meetings agenda. In his letter Mr. Watson expresses a view of the Directive that has to be taken into consideration. Graham Watson therefore felt it would be very difficult for the Task Group to reach a consensus viewpoint that accurately reflected the views of all Task Group members. He also mentioned that any members wishing the full version of Mr. Watson's letter could obtain a copy from him. He also said that Mr. Watson welcomed feedback on his letter however, could members please not contact him by fax instead could they either telephone him on 01360 770840 or write to him at 4 Kirkland Avenue, Blanefield, By Glasgow G63 9BZ.

HSE NOISE GUIDANCE RESEARCH

Jeane Anderson updated members on the current position of the revised noise guidance mentioned at the previous meeting, unfortunately due to the Noise Directive

it has not been possible to make further progress. In redrafting the free leaflet the comments received from some Task Group members will be taken onboard. HSE will continually be reviewing its guidance and how it gets its message across, the Task Group will be involved in this work.

Gary Booton referred to the tables in Document 3 circulated with the meetings agenda which detail the comments received on HSE's noise guidance. He felt there was nothing really surprising in the comments made however, it was interesting what was said with regards to the colour coding of guidance, which can be used to help identify what issues are being addressed.

David Allison referred to the minutes of the previous meeting containing the advice that when writing guidance it should be assumed that the target audience has the reading ability of a 12 year old, which he felt could be difficult. Jeane Anderson explained that guidance can sometimes be quite technical, the assumption being that the reader has a technical understanding, which often is not the case. Instead guidance should be kept simple by using plain language, which will help to get the message across without necessarily having to dumb down the advice given. David suggested that if any documents are intended for a wider audience it may be possible to use the Task Group as a sounding board by trying them out on various industry contacts.

Martin Bevan noted that the guidance review makes reference to supervisors however, people on the shop floor also have safety representatives and that it is important that people know they can go and see their safety representative should they wish to do so. Jeane Anderson replied that the report was written by consultants and that she was not sure if they would have spoken to trade unions as part of the review, she would however check on this.

Action: Jeane Anderson

Colin Holdhusen felt that badly photocopied A4 guidance sheets can present the wrong message and that pocket cards can be very useful. Jeane agreed however, there are occasions where more comprehensive guidance is required. Alan Robson agreed there was a need for plain English and that the emphasis should be on trying to get the leaflet read rather than on trying to get an individual to read the leaflet. He also said that they could endorse a leaflet to their representatives who could then take it to their members and say hey, this could be useful. Employers however, also need to play a part by saying to their employees that it is in their interest to read the leaflet, which mirrors the approach that was taken with the wearing of hard hats. The view was also expressed that there was a danger in making guidance smaller in that the message that is trying to be conveyed could become too dilute. Tony Romaniuk also highlighted the importance of not forgetting people who cannot read. On that note Tony McCarthy said that they had done a survey of the Foundry Industry, which found that illiteracy was high.

Tony Romaniuk felt that there was a strong need for additional guidance on carrying out noise assessments. Gary Booton said that around the table there was a wealth of knowledge on noise assessments that could be pulled together to say what makes a good noise assessment. Members were therefore asked to contribute examples of

good noise assessments that they may have. It was requested that the assessments be forwarded to Graham Watson before the 22 April so that they can be circulated with the agenda for the May meeting thereby enabling members to read the assessments for comment at the meeting.

Action: Task Group Members and Graham Watson

John Hustwick mentioned that the INVC has a database containing a large number of noise assessments and queried how they should respond. Gary explained that all that was required was for them to forward 1 or 2 assessments which they felt were fit for the purpose, he also said that a similar approach should be adopted by the EEF. Tony Romaniuk queried that if we are to produce guidance on what a good noise assessment is, what is the baseline that we will use. It was suggested that the baseline could be a noise assessment that had been accepted by an HSE Inspector following the issue of an Improvement Notice. Tim Ward explained however, that in such a situation what the Inspector will be interested in most will not necessarily be the assessment itself but what the employer proposes to do with it. If an assessment was not done very well on paper but the company adopted good standards of noise control following on from the assessment then the Inspector may well accept the Notice despite its faults.

Graham Watson recapped on what he thought the main implications were of the HSE noise guidance review on guidance that the Task Group could produce. He felt that of particular note was the general view that existing HSE noise guidance provided the right level of detail and had an adequate level of understanding. In addition there was no firm conclusion on whether sector specific guidance or general documents were preferred. Graham therefore felt that there was no need for the Task Group to try and produce either simpler versions of existing HSE noise guidance or to produce versions of the guidance, which were specific to the Engineering Sector. Instead he felt it appropriate for the Task Group to produce guidance that addresses issues not addressed elsewhere. This he felt could be produced as a series of free information sheets forming a suite of guidance that could be released over a period of time thereby helping to maintain interest in what the Task Group is trying to achieve. Members supported such an approach being taken. Gary Booton queried whether any areas where there were gaps in noise guidance had already been identified. Graham said that following on from visits made by HSE Inspectors to engineering premises the use of angle grinders and hammers had been identified as common sources of noise yet there was very little in the way of published guidance advising how the noise they emit could be better controlled. Often an assumption is made that the use of such tools does not lend itself to noise control measures, which is not the case. It would therefore be worth producing guidance, which addresses both these issues. A common misconception is that noise control measures are expensive, whilst some measures are many are not, guidance reinforcing this may also be useful. Gary asked members to identify where they felt there were gaps in noise guidance for discussion at the next Task Group meeting.

Action: Task Group Members

EINTG PUBLISHED GUIDANCE

Gary Booton informed members that unfortunately due to technical and staffing difficulties the EINTG leaflet was not yet out although it would shortly be posted on the EEF web site. Gary apologised for the delay.

EINTG WEB SITE

Gary reported that he had had a meeting with the Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, during which they talked about a number of issues including noise. The Agency's director was keen on the idea of the web site and saw it falling within what the Agency wants to do regarding Internet portals. He also saw noise as being an important issue. However, at the present moment there is no available money although more funds from the European Parliament should be on their way in April. As long as the Task Group has a broad based approach it should succeed in its application for funding. What the web site will in effect be is a Sounds Solution for Europe, a cheap and cheerful solution, which only needs the relevant financing to get it up and running. Gary hoped that at the next Task Group meeting we will be in a position to fill in an application form detailing the level of funding that we require.

ENGINEERING AND UTILITIES NOISE SECTOR OBJECTIVE 2001/02

Graham Watson briefly provided the background to the objective, which sought to ensure that in those premises visited by HSE Inspectors an adequate noise assessment, had been conducted and that a noise action plan based on the assessment was actively being followed. The objective ran from April 2001 to April 2002 and already 258 of the planned contacts had been made. Noise assessments had been mentioned on 211 occasions, in 111 cases there was an assessment, in 99 cases there was not one and in one case it was not clear either way. 41 of the assessments were said to be adequate and in 137 cases the assessment had either not been carried out or was inadequate (53% of all contacts). Noise consultants had produced some of the assessments that were inadequate. Amongst the issues raised was a lack of information regarding noise control measures that could be taken, the emphasis instead being on the use of ear protectors. The concern being that unless employers are provided with information on noise control measures that they can take, the assessment will not achieve very much. Employers in some cases possibly lacking the knowledge that they need to control noise better. It was therefore emphasised that if a consultant is used to carry out a noise assessment, the employer should specify exactly what they want the consultant to do including advising on noise control measures.

Ear protectors were said in 204 contacts to have been provided where required and only on one occasion were they not provided when they should have been. However, in 31% of cases where they had been provided they were not as widely worn as they should have been. Training in the use of ear protectors was said to have been provided on 39 occasions although in 6 cases it needed improving, 21 of contacts referred to a failure to provide the required training. Ear protection zones were provided on 73 occasions where required although 10 contacts said that such zones were absent when required. 31% of ear protection zones were however felt to require improving either due to concerns regarding signage, the area covered or the inconsistent use of ear protectors.

Controlling noise at source was mentioned in 165 contacts, 62 contacts said that the employer was doing it and in 18 cases they were planning to do it. There were 52 occasions where the employer was not controlling noise at source and had no plans to do so where noise control measures would have been reasonably practicable.

A total of 39 Improvement Notices had been issued so far, 36 required the completion of a noise assessment, 1 required a noise assessment and noise control measures to be taken and 2 notices required just control measures to be taken.

Graham referred to the few examples where noise reductions that had been achieved were quantified. These included a bearing company that had gone from the second action level to the first action level by using compressed air silencers, acoustic hoods and rubber lining on metal bins. Another company had changed a spray gun generating noise levels of 93 dB(A) with an airless spray gun generating noise levels of 82 dB(A). A wire drawing company had also reduced the noise emitted by a wire drawing machine by 5 dB(A) by fitting rubber damping and acoustic panels to where the rod coil is loaded onto the pay off bobbin. Where such data was provided it would be useful to gain further information so that case study material could possibly be developed.

Graham undertook to produce a written brief of the outcome of the objective for the next Task Group meeting by which time the objective will have finished. He also mentioned that a searchable database containing the information gathered as part of the Noise Single Issue Inspections was to be established. This will provide further useful data to help the Task Group target its efforts. Update: since the meeting it has been established that the database will be up and running within 2 to 3 weeks.

Action: Graham Watson

HSE NOISE PRIORITY TOPIC

Graham Watson briefed members on the Noise Priority Topic. The Health and Safety Commission has produced their Strategic Plan that sets the agenda for HSE over the forthcoming years. This establishes priority topics such as falls from a height, musculoskeletal disorders, slips and trips and stress, which are felt by the Commission to be areas where HSE could make a substantial difference. The main driving force to this approach is the need to achieve the targets set by Revitalising Health and Safety. The Commission has also identified priority sectors, of which the Engineering and Utilities Sector is not one. The HSE has though identified priority topics in addition to those established by the HSC one of which is noise. In a departure from usual practice HSE Inspectors will be instructed just to focus on the priority topics when they visit workplaces unless matters of evident concern arise, for example as a result of concerns raised by safety representatives. Inspectors are being asked to identify how well employers are performing in relation to noise by looking at the management of noise, how well they are controlling noise at source and the use of ear protectors. Inspectors will be provided with an information pack to assist them with the visits. The visits will commence nationally in April 2002.

EAR PROTECTION – ASSUMED PROTECTION

This was an issue raised by John Davies from DML shipyard following on from an article that he had recently read, expressing concerns regarding manufacturers' data on the protection provided by ear protectors. Tim Ward explained that this is not in effect a new issue. The problem arises from the data that the manufacturers supply relating not to the real use of the ear protectors but to the protection that they will provide in an ideal world. In practice however, ear protectors are not always correctly worn nor are they always worn when they should be, both of which detract from the protection that is actually provided. Reducing Noise at Work (L108) gives guidance on factors which influence the "real world" attenuation of ear protectors, and provides strategies to maximise their performance.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Graham Watson referred to an article that he had read in the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work publication "News." The article provided details of research that had been undertaken in France looking at the combined impact of exposure to solvents and noise on hearing. The study identified that simultaneous exposure to noise and aromatic solvents (e.g. styrene, toluene) exceeded the total damage generated by each one of these agents. The same was also found to be the case for exposure to solvents associated with alcohol ingestion. The study concluded that to prevent occupational noise induced hearing loss the effects of both noise and solvents in the working environment had to be considered.

DATES AND VENUES OF NEXT MEETINGS

Graham Watson suggested to members that rather than holding 4 meetings a year as was the case last year, that only 3 meetings be held as this may help to encourage a better attendance at the meetings. It would also allow more time for action in between the meetings. He also suggested that the dates be set for the remaining 2 meetings of this year, which again may help in boosting attendance. It was however, also agreed to set the date for the first meeting in 2003. As Task Group members are primarily located in the Midlands and in London it was also proposed that both locations be used as venues, which was agreed. The dates of the next meetings are:

2001 – 21st May HSE Rose Court, London
29th October HSE Birmingham

2002 – 21st January EEF Birmingham

There will be the usual 10 30 am start.