

Websites revisited

Redesigns have raised overall website standards and made it harder to pick outright winners our latest noise website review, found Lisa Russell and Tim Kaye

It's clear that a lot of websites have had a face-lift since the last time we did this survey more than two years ago (*Noise Bulletin Aug/Sept 2008 p6*). There are now many attractive sites giving good clear information, which made judging this 'non local authorities' part of our website review much harder as few sites stood out above their competition.

Southdowns is among several businesses with great redesigned sites and after much debate we made it our winner. Launched only in September, it is – not surprisingly – bang up to date, as well as being clear and informative. The services page has a cheerful selection of photo thumbnails and introductory sentences leading to pages that detail their experience and provide links to just-the-right length case studies. We praised the cross-referencing last time; the new design maintains this.

Brüel & Kjør's site was relaunched last year and is exceptionally clear and packed with information, making it another of our top sites. Clearly a lot of thought has gone into ensuring that it is easy for customers to find the information they need while offering the opportunity to spend extra time there on broader reading. We particularly like the *Waves* newsletter, which has all kinds of interesting articles, ranging from new police sirens to discussion about school booms. The design is simple and functional, proving that good sites don't need to be over-arty. Our only quibble was a slight wobble in the web page's top navigation menu when using the popular Firefox and Chrome browsers.

We really like the design and structure of the **Noise Abatement Society's** attractive site, which replaces a functional but unexciting predecessor. We did find it a

little confusing having both a front page (a splash with very little info) and a home page. The campaigns page is particularly good, serving as an introduction to eight distinct initiatives.

Some of the sites high on the list scored highly for an unusual section or feature. **MAS Environmental's** site has also been redesigned to great effect since last time and it's zoomed up the list thanks to an innovative feature that has just gone live. The new interactive sound level calculator allows you input noise sources and barriers with instant results. It is freely available for anyone to use, whether lay people or technical bods who don't have access to proprietary software. There is lots of scope for varying the parameters – for instance you can move the barrier around and watch the resulting sound levels change – and even more options are planned.

We didn't find much that was fun on the websites we visited this year, so **Sanctum's** Morph-like cute cartoon character was a bright spot. It appears in a variety of poses - reading, detecting and bogged down by questions – to liven up a fairly wordy fact-packed site.

Sample of our website review looking at the best of over 800 noise websites visited



Cirrus's site uses good illustrations

We were always on the lookout for extra features or just ordinary things that are well done and we particularly liked **Casella Measurement's** concept of a *Knowledge Base*, covering topics such as a guide to workplace noise measurements. OK, so it does only contain three articles, all of which

How we judged it...

We initially paid brief visits to 358 sites based on previous visits, links on other websites or online searches.

150 contenders were then paid a second, longer visit to assign the scores and comments that would determine the ranking of the top 45 published here. We've boiled the scores down to two this year – 'design' covers appearance and what it's like to get around the site, including navigation and how the information is structured. 'Content' takes account of how useful the site is, any innovative features and whether it appears to be kept up to date.

We concentrated on UK sites, or those that had a good reputation in the industry. We looked for sites that were easy to use, as well as short snappy ones. The *Knowledge Base* is also used by some firms to group clear information into its areas of expertise. **Accon** uses its specialisms to help clients with good

Saunders for a clear and concise presentation of its services aren't just cost-effective for private individuals but also giving some basic advice. Another nice touch is that each staff member's page is in the 1st person, which is friendly. And **10dB Acoustics** – which didn't make the top list – looks as though its site may be quite old but it does have a useful faq section giving straightforward brief answers to topics such as how do sound levels add up.

Something you don't often see these days is a complete site map or contents page – it can be useful particularly for those with papers or detailed articles buried away. Southampton University's **ISVR** allows you to see at a glance the full range of information.

Occasionally we come across nice little touches ideally suited to the internet, like the **Association of Noise Consultants'** alerts about stolen equipment serial numbers – perhaps it will help catch some

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Consultant Southdowns gets our top honours this year for a good looking informative site

Local authority websites (continued from previous page)

the last review to suggest that simply searching the A to Z, which most councils have, is the easiest way to find the pages and probably the one that most people would adopt. For this reason most councils' "ease of use" score has improved although a few (for instance **Colchester BC**, **Cookstown DC** and even the LBs of **Hackney** and **Harrow**), simply don't include noise in their A to Z listings, and it is occasionally depressing to see noise squashed in as an afterthought between nappies and nurseries.

However, there are councils that really need to brush up their web presence. Some sites – **Bury MBC** for instance – presumably have a noise section but finding it defeated the reviewers, apart from a mention of barking dogs.

Most unfortunately, some formerly great sites have been substantially downgraded – sadly the marvellous **Lancaster CC** site has been taken apart and is now a poor remnant of its former glory – one of the several examples where it appears cuts have hit noise pages hard. **East Staffordshire BC** too seems to have cut back on everything except firework noise.

Epping Forest DC, which had a great site, has no more than a cursory paragraph or two and **Reading BC**, which also received good marks in the last survey, is no more than contact details now.

Shining examples include the much-improved **LB Waltham Forest**, which now has a noise link on its home page and a rather nice section telling residents of noise successes. Some words of praise for **Angus Council** in Scotland, which looks at the various pieces of legislation that can be used to curb noise in a non-legalistic way, and has a very good FAQ section.

Another Scottish site, **Dumfries and Galloway Council**, has a section giving an idea of what a particular dB is equivalent to in terms of real sound (something we've seen elsewhere, but still like) for instance, 10dB is equivalent to a pin dropping, whereas 120dB is equivalent to a jet taking off. **Three Rivers DC** also has some interesting dB info including that a fridge humming at 2m distance emits 40dB and **Lisburn CC** has a rather nice noise "thermometer".



Westminster comes second in our review for a useful site

Several councils including **Huntingdon DC** have prominent sections on their Noise Action Week activities, which help to give people an idea of the degree of commitment to the issue. Statistics (such as **Huntingdon's** and **Bradford MDC's**) on the number of complaints resolved also look good.

We also liked **Bradford CC's** explanation of what they might do in investigating a complaint: "If out-of-office hours we may install sensitive noise-monitoring equipment eg tamper-proof tape

recorders that make recordings which are identical to what the human ear would hear or arrange for our own officers to visit in order to witness and assess the extent of the problem." **Wycombe DC** has a great external links to a BBC Newsnight report on reducing noise footprints.

Bridgend highlights on its site that it is prepared to deal with noise nuisance from cars, as this indeed can be a statutory nuisance. In Wales, **Torfaen DC** stood out for its nice use of jpegs and plentiful information, though many of the Welsh

OUR TOP LOCAL AUTHORITY WEBSITES

Key: The more blobs the better. A five blob 'quality' site will have good graphics and be jam packed full of information and visitors will want to come back. A five blob 'ease of finding' website will have a link on the front page – a one blob site will be hard to find even if looking for it (but we ran out of space to embarrass these ones)

Authority	Quality	Ease of finding
Elmbridge Borough Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Westminster, London Borough of	●●●●●	●●●●●
Bristol City Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Lisburn DC	●●●●●	●●●●●
Tendring District Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Wyre Borough Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Harlow District Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Tandridge District Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Ashford Borough Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Cookstown DC	●●●●●	●●●●●
Vale of White Horse District Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
East Staffordshire Borough Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Greenwich, London Borough of	●●●●●	●●●●●
Ipswich Borough Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Lambeth, London Borough of	●●●●●	●●●●●
Leeds City Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Leicester City Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Preston Borough Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
South Lakeland District Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
South Northamptonshire DC	●●●●●	●●●●●
Thanet District Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Three Rivers District Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Warrington Borough Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Welsh Assembly Government	●●●●●	●●●●●
Aberdeenshire Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Scottish Government	●●●●●	●●●●●
Bournemouth Borough Council	●●●●●	●●●●●
Dumfries and Galloway	●●●●●	●●●●●
Exeter City Council	●●●●●	●●●●●

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