

ARE WE ASSESSING CHILD CARE NOISE FAIRLY?

Tracy Gowen

Renzo Tonin & Associates

tgowen@rtagroup.com.au

ABSTRACT: In recent years there has been a significant increase in the demand for child care, with many centres opening in 'normal' suburban streets, just a garden fence between the outdoor play area and the neighbour's garden. Some may feel that the sound of children playing is a happy sound; that childcare is part of life and should just be accepted. Others consider that child care can be a very profitable business and should be treated as any other commercial operation which has 'amenity' obligations to meet. Councils across NSW and the Land and Environment Court do not appear to have reached a clear decision on how to assess a child care centre.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 12 September 2007, the NSW Division of AAS held a technical meeting addressing noise issues in relation to childcare centres. Significant noise issues were discussed, but no clear consensus was reached that night. To follow up from the evening a questionnaire, based on the evening's questions and discussion was prepared and submitted to those who attended. It is noted that it was not the intention of the questionnaire to set down a clear policy guideline. Rather, its purpose was to record the opinions of those who attended, with the potential to assist in the future development of a policy on child care centre noise.

Approximately 45 people attended the evening and 26 questionnaires were returned. The majority of the responses were from consultants (20), with 2 responses from Council representatives and 3 responses from organisations other than Department of Environment and Climate Change (DECC). There was 1 anonymous response. DECC notified that they were not in a position to provide a response to the questionnaire, however they were considering the development of guidelines to assist Councils in developing criteria and assessing childcare centre noise. DECC indicated that the responses to the questionnaire would provide useful input should the guideline be developed.

Based on popular responses to the questionnaire, the following comments are made by the author in relation to the assessment of child care centre noise:

- Child care centres with 5-10 children or more should require noise impact assessment, not including home-based 'family day care';
- Outdoor play, mechanical plant and drop off/ pick up are the most significant noise issues that should be assessed. However, where relevant, indoor play, additional traffic on the existing road network and on-site traffic noise should also be assessed;
- A slim majority agreed that child care centres should be assessed in the same way as any other commercial premises (ie in accordance with the INP). However many suggested that outdoor noise be excluded from this or that a modified criterion should be applied;
- A minimum background noise level should apply when the background noise level is found to be low (eg 30 dB(A) when the background noise level is less than 30 dB(A), as per the NSW Industrial Noise Policy);

- Background + 10 dB, or 40 dB(A), whichever is higher, is an acceptable criterion for outdoor play noise. However, most comments suggested that duration should be attached to this criterion (1.5 to 3 hours). There was a slightly greater preference that this be determined on a site to site basis rather than applied as a blanket criterion applied to all centres;
- Where a receiver is affected by more than 1 identified noise source from a child care centre, and where background + 10 dB is adopted for outdoor play noise, background + 5 dB was the preferred criterion for other noise sources associated with the centre.
- Council (or Regional Organisation of Councils; or DECC) should provide a policy on child care centre noise, provided they are well informed. It was suggested that guidelines prepared by AAS or AAAC may be useful in achieving some conformity in child care centre noise policy across different Councils;
- There was no real consensus in relation to the correct assessment location, although the general preference was that assessment should not be 'at the boundary', rather at some other location within the boundary (eg free field; areas likely to be used for relaxing; at the building façade);
- The majority of respondents preferred that upper floors should always be considered for 2 storey houses overlooking an outdoor play area;
- No tonality adjustment is required;
- There is significant variation (7 to 11 dB) in the range of source sound power levels for children at play outdoors adopted by respondents when calculating noise impact from proposed centres;
- There was no clear response on the minimum background noise level where a child care centre is no longer feasible, although generally a background level of 30-40 dB(A) was considered the point where appropriate treatment becomes difficult in a residential area;
- The majority agreed that road, rail, aircraft and industrial noise impacts onto child care centres should be considered in a noise impact assessment.

The results of the questionnaire are available on the Society's website at http://www.acoustics.asn.au/journal/Gowen_AA_August08.pdf