

Sound Management in Hospitality (Scotland)

Information and Staff Training Advice

The World Health Organisation states:

“COVID -safe environments require the limiting of spread of aerosol to reduce risk, especially inside”.

Raised voices are to be avoided because this increases aerosol spread and therefore the risk of spreading the virus, especially in enclosed spaces. Appropriate acoustic control measures are therefore critical to managing the risk successfully. This is a short briefing to give you information and advice which will help you to manage this risk.



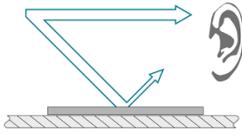
1. **Raised voices** – People raise their voices unconsciously in the presence of background noise. This is called the Lombard Effect. This increase in vocal effort can increase aerosol spread and therefore COVID risk. Signs of this happening are people leaning in to hear or exaggerated lip movements. People will struggle to hear speech clearly as other voices and noise from other sources builds up. The need to raise your voice starts to occur when the background sound levels reach about 70dB(A) at the entrance to the ear.



2. **Music sound levels** – The COVID emergency and precautionary approach by Scottish Government, resulted in guidance that there should be no music in the hospitality sector. This was based on the risk of people having to raise their voice to be heard above the music and hence increasing the risk of spreading the virus. Advice about managing music sound levels is given below.



3. **Social distancing v Acoustic Capacity** – The rules on social distancing are clear; they therefore set a limit on the capacity of a venue. However, if the space is reverberant, having fewer people using it may still result in the build-up of sound levels leading to raised voices. **In a reverberant venue there is still a risk of people raising their voices even if it is not full.**



4. **Improving the acoustics** - Introducing acoustic absorption inside reverberant (echoey) spaces can reduce the build up of sound which can cause people to raise their voices. Choosing the best absorptive materials and where to locate them requires specialist advice so seeking professional assistance will help you to maximise the potential benefit from the additional acoustic absorption. However, the general principle is that you should minimise the area of hard reflective surfaces.



5. **Managing music levels** - The sound system should be designed so that there is ready access to control the music volume. Distributing the sound with multiple loudspeakers will help provide a more even spread of music sound, thereby allowing the output from each speaker to be at relatively lower levels. An initial sound check should be carried out to identify appropriate settings. This will help to minimise the need for significant adjustments during operation which may lead to adverse customer comment. Advice on how to do this is given in [Scottish Government guidance - Low level background music and sound in hospitality: safe management](#).

6. **Promoting Considerate Behaviour** - Even if there is no background music, the sound levels must be managed through listening and observing behaviour, understanding the nature of the circumstances giving rise to any raised voices or difficulties in hearing. **Importantly, all staff should be briefed to recognise and report when raised voices may be occurring. If necessary, patrons should be asked to avoid unnecessary shouting or raising their voice.**

7. **Management Actions** - Management should implement policies which take account of Scottish Government guidance and make sure staff are given appropriate training in proactively managing behaviour likely to compromise COVID safety. **In particular, management must prioritise assessing whether the level of music is the main reason for the raised voices and, if it is, take immediate action to reduce the music sound level.**

8. **Training Focus** - Training should concentrate on the need for ongoing staff vigilance in identifying and reporting potential issues and management understanding of how to take effective action to control background sounds that are judged to be too loud. A suggested training prompt is therefore given which may be useful in helping management and staff remember the important messages for such controls.

'LOUD' - Training prompts for management & staff

- L**ISTEN All staff should be constantly aware of background sound levels and self aware of whether they are having to raise their voice to be understood.
- O**BERVE It should become second nature for staff to be on the lookout for people who are struggling to hear or be heard and therefore leaning-in or raising their voices. This applies to staff areas e.g. kitchens, as well as to public spaces.
- U**NDERSTAND What is causing the possible issue? Is it the music or are there other background noise sources to take into account, e.g. ventilation plant or simply patrons unnecessarily speaking loudly? Is the space too 'echoey' with lots of hard surfaces? Understanding the nature of the problem will allow you to determine the best action to take.
- D**O It is important to be prepared to take action quickly and proactively on an ongoing basis, as and when necessary. Slight adjustments in music level, taken early, will be more effective and avoid a build up of high customer speech levels which will be significantly more difficult to reduce once at a raised level. Remember, much can be done in advance e.g. improving the acoustics of spaces; checking the music levels before opening; and reducing ventilation noise. Having said that, the provision of good ventilation must be maintained to minimise the risks of COVID spread. Advice re this is available from the [HSE Ventilation and air conditioning during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#).