Appendix 9.1: Glossary of Acoustic Terminology

Sound Pressure	Sound, or sound pressure, is a fluctuation in air pressure over the static ambient pressure.
Sound Pressure Level (Sound Level)	The sound level is the sound pressure relative to a standard reference pressure of $20\mu Pa$ (20×10^{-6} Pascals) on a decibel scale.
Decibel (dB)	A scale for comparing the ratios of two quantities, including sound pressure and sound power. The difference in level between two sounds s_1 and s_2 is given by $20 \log_{10} (s_1 / s_2)$. The decibel can also be used to measure absolute quantities by specifying a reference value that fixes one point on the scale. For sound pressure, the reference value is $20\mu Pa$.
A-weighting, dB(A)	The unit of sound level, weighted according to the A-scale, which takes into account the increased sensitivity of the human ear at some frequencies.
Sound Level Indices	Noise levels usually fluctuate over time, so it is often necessary to consider an average or statistical noise level. This can be done in several ways, so a number of different noise indices have been defined, according to how the averaging or statistics are carried out.
$L_{eq,T}$	A noise level index called the equivalent continuous noise level over the time period, T. This is the level of a notional steady sound that would contain the same amount of sound energy as the actual, possibly fluctuating, sound that was recorded.
$L_{10,T}$	A noise level index. The noise level exceeded for 10% of the time period, T. L_{10} can be considered to be the "average maximum" noise level. Generally used to describe road traffic noise.
$L_{max,T}$	The maximum sound pressure level measured over the time period, T.
Free-Field	Far from the presence of sound reflecting objects (except the ground), usually taken to mean at least 3.5m distant.
Fast and slow time weighting	An averaging time used in sound level meters. Defined in BS5969.

In order to assist the understanding of acoustic terminology and the relative change in noise, the following background information is provided.

The human ear can detect a very wide range of pressure fluctuations, which are perceived as sound. In order to express these fluctuations in a manageable way, a logarithmic scale called the decibel, or dB scale is used. The decibel scale typically ranges from 0 dB (the threshold of hearing) to over 140 dB. An indication of the range of sound levels commonly found in the environment is given in the following table.

Typical Sound Levels found in the Environment

Sound Level	Location
0 dB(A)	Threshold of hearing
20 to 30 dB(A)	Quiet bedroom at night
30 to 40 dB(A)	Living room during the day
40 to 50 dB(A)	Typical office
50 to 60 dB(A)	Inside a car
60 to 70 dB(A)	Typical high street
70 to 90 dB(A)	Inside factory
100 to 110 dB(A)	Burglar alarm at 1m away
110 to 130 dB(A)	Jet aircraft on take off
140 dB(A)	Threshold of pain

The ear is less sensitive to some frequencies than to others. The A-weighting scale is used to approximate the frequency response of the ear. Levels weighted using this scale are commonly identified by the notation dB(A).

In accordance with logarithmic addition, combining two sources with equal noise levels would result in an increase of 3 dB(A) in the noise level from a single source.

A change of 3 dB(A) is regarded as the smallest change in broadband continuous noise that the human ear can detect, a 1 dB(A) increase is only perceptible under controlled conditions. A 10 dB(A) increase in noise represents a subjective doubling of loudness.

A noise impact on a community is deemed to occur when a new noise is introduced that is out of character with the area, or when a significant increase above the pre-existing ambient noise level occurs.

For levels of noise that vary with time, it is necessary to employ a statistical index that allows for this variation. These statistical indices are expressed as the sound level that is exceeded for a percentage of the time period of interest. In the UK, traffic noise is measured as the L_{A10}, the noise level exceeded for 10% of the measurement period. The L_{A90} is the level exceeded for 90% of the time and has been adopted to represent the background noise level in the absence of discrete events. An alternative way of assessing the time varying noise levels is to use the equivalent continuous sound level, $L_{Aeq,T}$. This is a notional steady level that would, over a given period of time (T) deliver the same sound energy as the actual fluctuating sound.

To put these quantities into context, where a receiver is predominantly affected by continuous flows of road traffic, a doubling or halving of the flows would result in a just perceptible change of 3 dB, while an increase of more than 25%, or a decrease of more than 20%, in traffic flows represent changes of 1 dB in traffic noise levels (assuming no alteration in the mix of traffic or flow speeds).