



Ministry
of Justice

The Sound Environment at HMP Five Wells

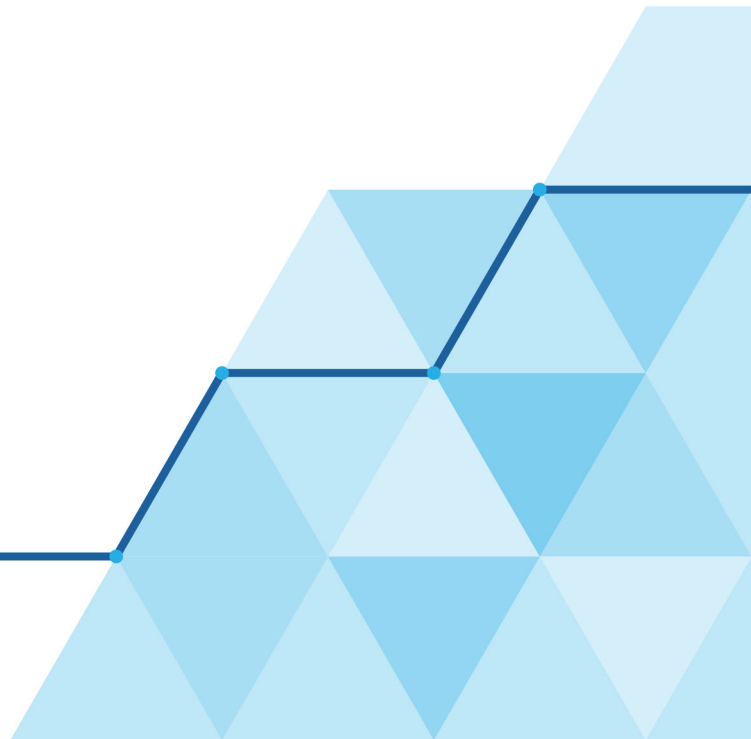
Staff and Prisoner Views

**Dr Rachel Langford, Dr Elena Sharratt, Lamia Soyel,
Associate Prof. Tom Rice**

Ministry of Justice

Ministry of Justice Analytical Series

2024



The Analysis Directorate exists to improve policy making, decision taking and practice by the Ministry of Justice. It does this by providing robust, timely and relevant data and advice drawn from research and analysis undertaken by the department's analysts and by the wider research community.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by the Ministry of Justice (nor do they represent Government policy).

First published 2024



© Crown copyright 2024

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at researchsupport@justice.gov.uk

This publication is available for download at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/research-and-analysis/moj>

ISBN 978 1 91691 54 9

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to thank the staff and prisoners who took part in this research, for generously giving their time and sharing their experiences with us. We would also like to thank Bethan Hawkes (G4S Deputy Director of Five Wells at the time), for supporting us during our scoping visits, and Nicola Redding (G4S Senior Safer Custody Manager) for assisting us with the organisation and implementation of the fieldwork, and to both for being so accommodating.

The authors

Dr Rachel Langford and Lamia Soyel work in the Evaluation & Prototyping Hub and Dr Elena Sharratt works in Remote Legal Advice, all under the remit of the Analysis Directorate in the Ministry of Justice. Associate Prof. Tom Rice is a specialist in Sound Ethnography and works at the University of Exeter.

Contents

List of tables

Glossary

1. Summary	1
2. Introduction	5
2.1 The New Prisons Programme	5
2.2 Physical Design of Prisons	6
2.3 The Sound Environment in Prisons	7
2.4 Five Wells Design Elements to Improve the Sound Environment	8
2.5 Study Aims	8
3. Method	10
3.1 Context	10
3.2 Design	10
3.3 Sample	10
3.4 Data Collection and Analysis	11
3.5 Ethics	12
3.6 Limitations	13
4. Findings	14
4.1 Staff and Prisoner views on the sound environment at Five Wells	14
4.2 Theme 1: Prison Design	15
4.3 Theme 2: Spectrum of Sounds	19
4.4 Theme 3: Community	23
4.5 Theme 4: Staffing	26
5. Conclusion and Considerations	30
5.1 Summary	30
5.2 Considerations	31
5.3 Conclusion	33
6. References	35
Appendix A	37
Interview Questions for Staff	37
Focus Group Questions for Prisoners	38

List of tables

Table 1: Table of Themes

14

Glossary

Term	Description
Sound	Refers in a general way to audible vibrations.
Noise	Refers to the perceived qualities of some sounds (noise is a subset of sound, or a set of categories of sound). Noise is used to describe sounds that are considered unnecessary, excessively loud, persistent, intrusive, irritating, or unpleasant.
G4S	Security and Facility Services Company
HMPPS	His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service
OMU	The Offender Management Unit is where a team of staff work within the prison to help prisoners achieve their sentence plan goals as they plan for release.
CSU	The Care and Separation Unit is where prisoners can be segregated away from the general prison population for their own safety or the safety of others, for breaking prison rules or because they are suspected of having drugs or other illicit items in their possession.
T60	Houseblock designs of four storeys that accommodate 240 prisoners, 60 per floor.

1. Summary

Background

HMP Five Wells is a resettlement prison for Category C adult men. Some physical design features of Five Wells intended to improve the sound environment and minimise negative impacts of noise, as well as promote well-being, safety, and resettlement.

The aim of this research was to understand how the sound environment was experienced by staff and prisoners at Five Wells. Five Wells was the first of the six new prisons to be built as part of the Prison Estate Transformation Programme (PETP) and subsequently the New Prisons Programme (NPP). The timing of this research enabled opportunities for early learning to feed into the design of future new prisons and new houseblocks in the existing estate.

This report is an example of MoJ delivering on its Evaluation and Prototyping Strategy.¹ In complex areas such as this, building in these learning opportunities improves the impact of evidence by making it timelier and more accessible for decision makers.

Methods

This research used an in-depth, qualitative case study research design, suitable for a single field site, and was informed by sound ethnography. Qualitative data was gathered using interviews, focus groups, ad-hoc conversations with staff and prisoners, and observations.

Findings

The experiences of staff and prisoners informed four themes that were identified through thematic analysis.

The **prison design** was found to have both positive and negative impacts on the sound environment. Closed landings were reported to reduce the noise levels apparent in older prisons. However, certain design choices such as the central hub, Cross Well, meant that some areas of the prison (e.g., the library, the healthcare waiting area and education) were

¹ [MOJ Evaluation and Prototyping Strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/614211/moj_evaluation_and_prototyping_strategy.pdf)

impacted by the noise caused by hundreds of people passing through it each day, reducing privacy, and disrupting educational activities. Additionally certain features (e.g., windows, vents, and downpipes) generated unwanted and intrusive noises that impacted the reported well-being of prisoners.

The **spectrum of sounds** found within the prison environment were experienced differently by staff and prisoners. The sounds were personally interpreted based on life's experiences rather than consequences of the physical environment. Some sounds were identified as having a normalising effect on prisoners, showing that a more thoughtful use of sound could help with rehabilitative activities. However, sound was often interpreted differently, the same sound could be experienced as a soothing escapism for one prisoner and a painful reminder of imprisonment for another. Therefore, creating a soundscape that works for so many individuals is difficult.

A relationship between the concept of **community** and the nature of the sound environment in Five Wells was found. Prisoners categorised by their status, or a particular need, were housed together on a landing, and this produced different sound environments. Landings where prisoners demonstrated sound control (i.e., controlling one's own sound making) was seen as a sign of respect that fostered a sense of community.

There was also a two-way relationship between sound and **staffing**. Short staffing and staff making excessive noise at Five Wells was reported to have a direct impact on the sound environment. Additionally, sound was reported to affect staff members' ability to carry out their roles. Staff and prisoner interviewees felt that a consistent approach in relation to staff practice can have a positive impact on the sound environment, and if unnecessary noise was reduced this could improve staff and prisoner well-being.

Considerations

This report identifies the following **nine** considerations to inform design and operational functioning in new and existing prisons in relation to sound.

Given staff and prisoner preferences for the quieter sound environments of closed landing blocks, opportunities to design such landings across the prison estate should be explored.

Sounds of nature and activities which mimic normal life outside of prison can improve the mental health and well-being of prisoners. These sounds were reported to provide a sense of normality and imply that access to areas like nature, the gym, the barbershop and the multifaith area can be utilised as a key component of rehabilitative work with prisoners.

Opportunities for prisons to include quiet and tranquil spaces, accessible to prisoners and staff, should be sought out. Certain areas of the prison were reported to have a good acoustic environment that was well soundproofed (e.g., the multi-faith area and visits hall).

Experimenting with integrating prisoners of varying levels of disruptiveness would allow for monitoring of whether better behaved prisoners can have a positive effect on others. This may contribute towards a more controlled and consistent sound environment and an associated sense of community across the estate. The qualitative research highlighted that quiet and respectful landings were reported to forge a stronger sense of community.

Building in adequate sound proofing in large open atriums and situating quiet facilities away from central hubs in future prison designs can improve the noise environment. Staff and prisoner interviewees felt some areas of the prison were negatively impacted by the noise caused by the high levels of traffic from the main hall.

Further work with suppliers to understand and eliminate noise issues relating to design features (e.g., barless windows, ventilation, and pipes) might mitigate some of the reported negative impacts on prisoner well-being.

To make cells calmer and improve prisoner well-being, consider ways for staff to minimise unnecessary noise within their own practice (e.g., keys, banging gates, talking loudly), particularly at night when prisoners are trying to sleep. Prisoners reported that staff making excessive noise had a significant effect on their mental health and well-being.

Results indicate the importance of staff implementing practices that address noise disturbances consistently. Staff having confidence to intervene and effectively challenge prisoners creating loud noise can contribute to a more controlled and consistent sound

environment. Staff and prisoners reported concerns regarding officers not challenging behaviours associated with noise disturbances.

Implementing closed radio network systems across the prison estates might be worth considering, given the findings on the negative impact of an open radio network on prisoners and staff. Staff reported being distracted by the constant noise of the radio, missing important messages due to information overload, and security issues due to prisoners being able to hear staff communications.

This study identifies several areas relating to the sound environment at Five Wells that are working well and should continue, and several areas that are not working as intended and need further consideration. This report provides considerations for improving building design, confirming the necessity of a test-learn-adapt model. It is essential that the learning from Five Well's be transferred to future prison designs and extensions.

2. Introduction

2.1 The New Prisons Programme

HMP Five Wells opened in February 2022, and HMP Fosse Way opened in June 2023 as part of the Prison Estate Transformation Programme (PETP).

PETP is now the New Prisons Programme (NPP). NPP will be responsible for creating 20,000 new prison places, 10,000 places in four entirely new prison sites and the remainder by expanding and refurbishing existing prisons.

The six new sites will include five resettlement prisons for Category C, adult men and one Category B for adult men. Resettlement prisons are those which have a specific role in preparing prisoners for release. Generally, they hold prisoners who are serving sentences of three years or more, who have more than three months to serve on their sentence. The premise of resettlement is to support prisoners to address factors which may act as barriers to integration back into the community.² Due to the under supply of suitable places, in exceptional circumstances this group are housed in Category B local prisons, which can be crowded, and may offer restricted regimes with few resettlement activities. One of the ambitions of the NPP is that Category C prisoners have access to a fuller resettlement regime in an environment better suited to meeting rehabilitative needs.

The MoJ reviewed existing national and international evidence and undertook extensive stakeholder engagement to design a blueprint for new prisons. The resultant design focuses on three integrated elements, all of which are noted to impact safety, well-being, resettlement, and recidivism outcomes. These elements include: the regime design (services, activity, and resettlement regime), the cultural design (staff and prisoner relationships, and overall organisational culture), and the physical design (the site and

² This includes supporting prisoners to secure appropriate accommodation on release from prison (e.g., Williams, Poyser & Hopkins, 2012), to continue to take part in interventions aimed at building skills, resilience and positive attitudes, to support family links, to secure employment and/or training, and to access appropriate support and benefits (PHE, 2018).

building typography, size, physical features, materials, and finishes, and look and feel of the physical environment).

Together, these three elements make up the overall prison design. Crucially, each element does not stand alone but depends upon, and works alongside, the others. For example, the physical design of the prison will offer suitable space for regime design activities to take place, and these activities will be delivered by specially trained, supportive staff.

Whilst the regime and cultural design are important aspects, which have been, and will continue to be, evaluated elsewhere,³ this research was commissioned with the intention of evaluating the physical design and, more specifically, how it impacted the sound environment at Five Wells.

2.2 Physical Design of Prisons

Previously, limited attention had been paid to the impact of a prison's physical environment on staff and prisoners. Most of the existing prison estate in England and Wales was designed to maximise capacity, minimise cost, and allow for large numbers of prisoners to be observed by few staff at any given time. This has translated to features such as galleried landings spanning multiple floors, long and clear sight lines, 'hardened' finishes such as bars and metal gates, institutional and industrial colours and materials, stark direct lighting, a lack of green space, and an absence of private peaceful areas.

Existing evidence demonstrates that this design is not conducive to the management of people with complex mental, emotional, or physical health needs who account for a significant portion of the population. Findings revealed that 52% of the people in prison who responded to a survey reported having mental health problems (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2021) and 29% of people who took initial assessments before participating in education courses were identified as having a learning disability or difficulty in 2019–2020 (MoJ, 2021).

³ HMP Five Wells One Year On: What have we learnt?

2.3 The Sound Environment in Prisons

Within this report, the term ‘sound’ refers in a general way to audible vibrations. The term ‘noise’ refers to the perceived qualities of some sounds. Noise is a kind of sound that is usually negatively perceived, and the term tends to describe sounds that are considered unnecessary, excessively loud, persistent, intrusive, irritating, or unpleasant.

A key feature highlighted in the national and international evidence review (and the primary focus of this report) was the impact of noise and sound on prisoners and staff. As is widely acknowledged, older prison designs and materials (e.g., open landings and hard materials and surfaces) create loud noises, uncomfortable echoing, and large reverberation patterns (Wener, 2012). On top of this, a constant background hum from things like industrial heating and ventilation is noticeable (Wener, 2012). The prison literature notes the profoundly negative impact that this sound environment can have on prisoners, with noise being linked to poor mental health (Hemsworth, 2016). The Woolf report (1991) identified that prisoners and staff relationships and the overall atmosphere of the prison were impacted by the building design. Rice (2016) notes that a unique aspect of prison is that prisoners are a ‘captive audience’ to the sound environment in which they are held. They cannot escape exposure to unpleasant noises and have limited capacity to control them and this may be experienced as a kind of ‘punishment’ (Rice, 2016), reinforcing the already punishing function of prison itself.

Findings from the prison literature are supported by research into sound within other institutional settings, such as hospitals (Rice, 2013) and schools (Gallagher, 2011). Annoyance, irritation, fatigue, raised blood pressure, impaired communication and task performance and poor mental health are among some of the detrimental effects of intrusive noise identified in hospital settings (affecting both patients and staff), whilst noise has been found to impact cognitive performance in school children (Basner *et al.*, 2014; Xyrichis *et al.*, 2018). Given the increasing incidents of self-harm and assaults (MoJ, 2023), the low retention rate of prison staff (HMPPS, 2023), and the fact that more than half the prison population reported having mental health problems (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2021), these sound-related findings are important.

2.4 Five Wells Design Elements to Improve the Sound Environment

Many of the physical design features of Five Wells were informed by the latest available evidence on prison design, including ways to improve the sound environment and minimise negative impacts, promoting well-being, safety, and resettlement. The design features expected to improve the sound environment include:

- The accommodation being divided into seven residential blocks, forming a bespoke T60 design, meaning they are built in the shape of a cross. The residential blocks each have four floors, accommodating 240 prisoners, 60 on each floor. The houseblocks are closed and contained, as opposed to open atrium style galleried landings. These design features are expected to eliminate the noise generated from the open landings that echo and reverberate in older prisons.
- A smaller number of prisoners reside on each floor in comparison to the larger number of prisoners residing on open landings in older style prisons, which is expected to contribute to a reduction in noise.
- The modern design features of Five Wells move away from the hard materials and surfaces that are characteristic of older prisons, with the aim of reducing noise.
- Soundproofing materials that reduce noise levels are a significant feature of the Five Wells design, aiming to reduce the echoing and reverberation found in older prisons.

2.5 Study Aims

The main aim of this research was to understand how the sound environment was experienced by staff and prisoners at Five Wells. Five Wells is intended to serve as a ‘test learn adapt’ site from which crucial findings on the design and operation can be captured and fed into the design of the next four NPP sites and additional house blocks in existing prisons.

This study forms part of a broader programme of work, commissioned by the new Prison Policy team with the intention of evaluating the PETP physical design. This broader

programme will explore several variables related to the physical environment of the new prisons, including light, temperature, sound, and sleep. One strand of this programme will use sound, light, temperature, and sleep monitors to collect quantitative data on these conditions in HMP Five Wells. However, because sound disturbances are not exclusively associated with the volume of sound, and perceptions of sound can vary by individual, this study was designed to explore and measure sound qualitatively using methods informed by sound ethnography (see methodology section for more detail).

This programme of work is an example of MoJ delivering on its Evaluation and Prototyping Strategy,⁴ utilising opportunities for early learning to improve the impact of our evidence and inform decision making.

The key aims of this study were:

1. To gather the views and experiences on how staff and prisoners experienced the sound environment at Five Wells, including their comparisons with other prisons.
2. To explore how the sound environment at Five Wells impacted staff and prisoners' behaviour, well-being, and overall prison experience.
3. To generate better understanding of how the physical design features impacted the sound environment at Five Wells to share these findings with other prisons to inform physical and operational design.

⁴ [MOJ Evaluation and Prototyping Strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674242/evaluation-and-prototyping-strategy.pdf)

3. Method

3.1 Context

The research was carried out in June 2023 and at this time the prison had been open for 18 months and was operating at 87% capacity. Five Wells was the first of the PETP sites to be built, which meant that there was considerable scope to learn early lessons about the sound environment. These findings will be considered and, where possible, be applied to future prison designs and additional houseblocks in existing prisons.

3.2 Design

This research used an in-depth, qualitative case study research design, suitable for a single field site and informed by sound ethnography. In ethnography, researchers immerse themselves in an environment for sustained periods of time, closely observing social interactions and dynamics, and using other qualitative research techniques (such as interviewing). Sound ethnography uses close listening and auditory observations, alongside situated listening (where researchers and research participants listen to and discuss the environment together) to document the sound and noise environment and their impacts on inhabitants.

3.3 Sample

The research team were assisted by an operational lead in Five Wells with recruiting staff and prisoners to be involved in interviews and focus groups. The research team requested to speak with as wide a variety of staff and prisoners as possible (e.g., staff from all grades and roles and prisoners from each houseblock). This request was facilitated where possible, although restrictions existed regarding staff availability and researcher safety due to the demanding and unpredictable nature of the prison environment.

Staff participation consisted of seven semi-structured interviews and ad hoc conversations.⁵ Staff participants were directly employed by G4S or HMPPS and worked

⁵ See section 3.4 for more details.

in a wide range of departments including, Education, the Offender Management Unit (OMU), Industries, the Senior Management Team (SMT), the Care and Separation Unit (CSU), the residential units (houseblocks), Security, and Safety Teams. The research team spoke to staff from all grades (from prison officer to Director). The demographics of these individuals were not recorded.

Prisoner participation consisted of four semi-structured focus groups of between four to eight prisoners and ad-hoc conversations. The research team spoke to prisoners residing on each of the seven houseblocks within Five Wells. This was deemed necessary as many of the houseblocks are designed to accommodate different types of prisoners (e.g., vulnerable prisoners, those in drug recovery, those with enhanced status and privileges, those new to Five Wells and in their 'induction' phase). The demographics of these individuals were not recorded.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers identified key locations for the fieldwork by reviewing relevant documentation and data specific to the design of Five Wells and through a scoping visit to understand the environment, prison layout and pertinent sounds. Through this process, the team identified the following locations to collect data: seven houseblocks, education, industries, healthcare, the gym, outdoor activity spaces, transitional spaces (e.g., corridors and walkways), the library, the multi-faith room, staff offices, the staff canteen, the Care and Separation Unit, the visitation hall, and the induction suite. The scoping visit was hosted by the Deputy Director of Five Wells at the time, with whom the research team discussed the sound and noise environment.

The fieldwork took place across five days in June 2023 where data was collected by four researchers. Interviews and focus groups were carried out by at least two members of the research team (an interviewer and a notetaker). All interviews and focus groups were recorded and lasted between 20–65 minutes.

A further key part of the research involved observing areas of the prison and documenting the sound environment. The researchers were able to move around the prison unescorted, reducing the demands on staff time and response bias in data collection.

The research team spent between 15–90 minutes in each identified location, returning to each area on multiple occasions to observe different times of the day. During observations, detailed notes were taken on what sounds were present, how people reacted to them, and any other reflections of relevance.

When observations took place, the research team also conducted ad hoc conversations with staff and prisoners that focused on the experience and perceived impact of sound and noise, especially in relation to the physical design of Five Wells. Additionally, questions were asked about sounds arising within the location as they unfolded in real time (e.g., if a researcher was in conversation with a prisoner and an alarm went off, they would discuss it together). Notes were taken on both the sound environment, and the topic of conversation during these interactions, with some comments or insights transcribed verbatim.

Following the data collection period, the research team reviewed all the fieldnotes and used the method of thematic analysis ‘for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns’ of emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Statements and observations directly relevant to the sound environment at Five Wells were then grouped under one or more of these emerging themes or derived subthemes. The analysis was exhaustive in that all comments related to the sound environment were coded to at least one theme.

3.5 Ethics

For all formal interviews and focus groups, staff and prisoners were given an information sheet detailing the aims of the project and a consent form. The research team also verbally read from these documents, checking understanding, and taking questions, before asking participants to complete the consent forms. Staff and prisoner interviewees were advised that the conversations would be recorded but that any responses would be anonymised. Staff and prisoners were also told that participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and they were free to leave if they wanted to. Additionally, they were made aware that they could withdraw their participation in the research after being interviewed or involved in a focus group if they changed their mind. Three prisoners did decline to take part and left the interview room: everyone else consented to all formal interviews and focus groups.

For the ad hoc conversations, formal consent forms were not completed as it was not practical to do so, and not deemed proportionate as conversations were not recorded. However, all individuals were told about the project and its aims and were asked for verbal consent before ad hoc conversations commenced.

3.6 Limitations

The use of qualitative case study methodology has its limitations. Although enabling rich, in-depth information to be gathered on a single site, it is not always possible to generalise findings. Whilst the report provides considerations for future prison designs and extensions, the findings are unique to Five Wells.

Ethnographic work is sometimes considered problematic because researchers can come to rely heavily on data provided by one or two key informants. The research was designed to avoid this potential issue through strategically selecting a diversity of participants at Five Wells, thereby ensuring that the stories of a few key participants were not allowed to distort the data. Despite attempting to include a diverse range of participants, demographic information was not recorded, therefore we are unable to confirm whether our findings are representative of the general population of Five Wells.

The participants for interviews and focus groups were selected by G4S, subject to availability and safety concerns. G4S staff may have (subconsciously or otherwise) only selected those who would speak in a positive way about the prison, potentially limiting the sample selected. The research was designed to mitigate this by also including ad hoc conversations with staff and prisoners who were not selected.

The interviews and focus groups consisted of a relatively small sample size. However, rich, in-depth information was provided that reached a point of saturation where the research team stopped hearing new themes and ideas.

Finally, Five Wells is a newly built prison and, during the time of research, was at 87% occupancy. Therefore, some of the sound documented in this report may have changed now the prison has reached full capacity.

4. Findings

4.1 Staff and Prisoner views on the sound environment at Five Wells

Four main themes, incorporating 14 subthemes (presented in Table 1), were drawn from the analysis. The themes highlight prominent features in the accounts of participants' experiences at Five Wells during the time of the study.

Table 1: Table of Themes

<p>Theme 1: Prison Design</p> <p>Areas of the prison</p> <p>The Cross design</p> <p>Residential blocks</p> <p>Building features</p>	<p>Theme 2: Spectrum of Sound</p> <p>Inevitable prison sounds</p> <p>Welcomed prison sounds</p> <p>Sounds of normality</p> <p>Sounds that remind prisoners they are in prison</p>
<p>Theme 3: Community</p> <p>Sound and respect</p> <p>Sound and different populations</p>	<p>Theme 4: Staffing</p> <p>Short staffing</p> <p>The disrupting effect of noise</p> <p>Negative staff practice</p> <p>Positive staff practice</p>

4.2 Theme 1: Prison Design

“I’ve stayed in worse hotels” – Prisoner

“Flat packed jail” – Prisoner

The physical design of Five Wells was found to have both positive and negative impacts on the sound environment.

Closed landings were reported to reduce the noise levels found in older prisons.

However, certain design choices such as the central hub in Cross Well, meant that areas of the prison (e.g., the library, the healthcare waiting area, and education) were impacted by the noise of hundreds of people passing through it each day. Additionally certain features (e.g., windows, vents, and downpipes) generated unwanted and intrusive noises that impacted the reported well-being of prisoners. Importantly, the vents also created a security risk by allowing sensitive information to be overheard.

Areas of the Prison

Five Wells is located at the edge of the town of Wellingborough in a semi-rural setting.

Multiple prisoners reported that they found the external sound environment to be generally quiet and peaceful.

There were contradictory assessments from prisoners on the general construction of Five Wells. One prisoner said, “I’ve stayed in hotels worse than this”, whilst another remarked the building was “shoddy”, a “flat-packed jail” where sound proofing was “non-existent”, and noises reverberated in the cells.

Cross Well is the central hub of the prison through which hundreds of people move each day to reach the library, healthcare, multi-faith area, and education, which made it noisy at times.

The library is part of the main hall and whilst from a design perspective this is a central and accessible location, it is affected by the transit noise of prisoners passing through. The prison attempted to reduce the noise disturbance by installing a partition wall between the atrium and library, but staff reported that this did not solve the noise problem. The healthcare waiting area is also an extension of the main hall and several staff and

prisoners reported that this design was not appropriate because the space was not calm or private.

The multi-faith room was also accessed via the atrium. It was adjacent to the library and opposite the health care waiting area, but was quite separate acoustically, being accessed by a short corridor and walled off from the atrium itself. This large, carpeted space was felt to be a good environment acoustically for its users. Observationally, the research team shared this view, finding the multi-faith room to be a peaceful space, distanced from the noise in the corridors. One prisoner described using this space to find peace and quiet to support his faith, which enhanced his well-being. However, several staff who worked in the Offender Management Unit (OMU) offices on the floor above reported hearing singing and music associated with religious services that affected their ability to work.

In education classrooms, a key part of Cross Well, teaching staff complained about noise from the corridors disrupting activities inside the classrooms. This was exacerbated by classrooms having internal windows into the corridor, so those studying were easily distracted. One member of staff complained that the air conditioning in some classrooms caused excessive noise, and this created a barrier to communication; it caused the teacher vocal strain and created an additional distraction for neurodiverse prisoners (e.g., those with ADHD) who already have trouble concentrating. Teaching staff described their experience of excessive noise in the library as problematic as they were expected to do one-to-one work there.

The **visitation hall** is a larger area full of tables and chairs where prisoners can meet with family and friends on arranged visits. This area was felt to be a good acoustic environment and was praised and appreciated by both staff and prisoners. Sound-absorbent panels, attached to the high ceiling was a visible feature of the space and there was none of the echoing that prisoners reported as being characteristic of visits halls in other prisons.

The **legal visits area** is comprised of several small interview rooms where prisoners can meet with legal representation, virtually or face-to-face. It was reported by a staff member that it was possible to hear conversations going on inside the rooms when on duty in the legal visit's corridor. The lack of auditory privacy threatened the confidentiality of these discussions.

One large building on the Five Wells estate was purpose built to house ‘**industries**’, a series of large workshops and studio spaces where practical skills such as woodworking and graphic design are taught. The **gym** is housed in one of the workshop rooms. The gym is a loud environment due to the number of people who can use it at one time, the noise of weights being used, the sounds of physical effort, and the loud music which accompanies workout sessions. It was commonly reported by staff and prisoners that the current location of the gym had not been planned in the original design resulting in no purpose-built gym.⁶ The existing facility was described by one prisoner as “an afterthought”. The metal roof and lack of sound proofing caused sounds to echo and reverberate, adding to the noisiness of the space.

In terms of the industry workshops themselves, none of the staff or prisoners raised concerns relating to sound. Sounds in some industry areas, such as the barbers, were felt to be pleasant and normalising by some staff and prisoners (see section on spectrum of sound).

The Cross Design

The residential blocks at Five Wells follow a T60 design⁷ with the intention to allow increased natural light into each cell, enable staff to have a greater view of prisoners, and create outdoor courtyard-type spaces between houseblocks.

The cross feature had implications for sound. Prisoners in cells near the centre of the ‘x’ have busier sound environments than those further along as people congregate there for association and servery, where meals are provided. Those in the centre also have more exposure to cell bells⁶ that sound centrally for the attention of staff. Additionally, those in certain cells at the end of the corridors are nearer the block perimeter gates which are open and closed at various times in the night, making noise that can disrupt the sleep of prisoners.

⁶ The operator knew that a gym wasn’t included in the original design.

⁷ Houseblock designs of four storeys that accommodate 240 prisoners, 60 per floor.

Despite the implications, it was recognised by prisoners that the T60 design resulted in less ‘window warriors’,⁸ as the distance between corridors was too large to make shouting between cells effective.

The Residential Blocks

The floors in each houseblock are closed and contained, as opposed to open atrium style galleried landings. The lack of open landings was generally considered to create quieter and calmer sound environments. Prisoners found Five Wells to be less echoey, and one prisoner described “no creaking or old building noises” that were characteristic of traditional galleried designs.

Building Features

Despite houseblock landings being closed, prisoners and staff frequently mentioned that the **pipes** and **air vents** running up the side of the building conducted sound, carrying it between floors. This often meant that prisoners could hear noise such as doors slamming, music, shouting, and other verbal sounds coming from other cells, generally those above them rather than to the sides. One prisoner reported that he could speak to a person on another floor through the vent and it “sounds like he’s next door”. Whilst many prisoners were annoyed by this noise, this prisoner found it to be positive, enabling a connection with another person.

Staff were aware that air vents meant conversations (between one another or with residents) could be overheard, with potential risks for confidentiality and security. This concern was perpetuated by the reported lack of space for private meetings to take place.

Further disruptive noises relating to building design were experienced in the houseblocks. It was mentioned by several prisoners that the metal **downpipes** from the gutters had a bend in them, so that the sound of water loudly “dripping”, “running” and “echoing” from inside the pipes could be heard when it rained. The volume and persistence of this sound was described by one prisoner as “torture”.

Five Wells was designed to have larger, barless **windows**, to create a sense of normality and connection with outside space and increase exposure to natural light. This design was

⁸ Prisoners shouting to each other between cell windows.

achieved by constructing windows with thick, shatter proof, and therefore secure, glass. Despite the positive intentions, the most common complaint from prisoners in this study was the ‘cracking’, ‘popping’ and ‘banging’ of windows, an effect apparently produced by the thick security glass expanding and contracting in response to temperature changes.⁹ These noises were described as having a variety of negative consequences, including startling prisoners, causing a spike in anxiety, and sometimes affecting their sleep. Talking about the impact of being woken up by the window noise, one prisoner reported feeling “groggy” throughout the day and added that people are “not very happy in prison anyway” and broken sleep just “tops it off”. Whilst some prisoners thought that the windows were good at limiting the intrusion of sound from outside, the cracking noise remained a major problem.

4.3 Theme 2: Spectrum of Sounds

“Hearing birds is better than hearing keys” – Prisoner

“Keys are the silent killer” – Prisoner

The way that sounds were experienced by staff and prisoners were not consequences of the physical environment, but instead personally interpreted based on life’s experiences. These experiences vary so the same sound could be experienced as a soothing escapism for one prisoner and a painful reminder of imprisonment for another. This section explores the different ways that sounds were experienced.

Inevitable Prison Sounds

Whilst Five Wells was designed to minimise sound disruptions, there were some sounds which staff and prisoners felt were an inevitable part of prison life. One staff member reported “normal prison sounds” as being “cell bells, prisoners, the radio, doors, and gates”. These views were echoed by one prisoner who referred to the sounds of doors banging as the “nature of being in prison”. Additionally, noises from fighting were seen by another prisoner as being “part and parcel of being in jail”.

⁹ The research team were provided this explanation by both prisoners and the senior management team, although it has not been verified by a construction expert.

The idea that certain sounds are inevitable was further confirmed when discussions took place about the training that staff attended. This training involved a re-enactment of the prison environment, where staff were purposefully taught under noisy conditions to prepare them to practice effective communication during incidents.

Overall, there was a degree of acceptance surrounding inevitable prison sounds. Among both staff and prisoners, it was expected and understood that, where high numbers of people are gathered in close proximity, noise will be generated. Nevertheless, staff and prisoners did report ways of coping in response to such sounds by making a deliberate effort to “zone out” and become desensitised. These techniques were deemed necessary to live or work in prison successfully.

A few staff members explained the gradual process of detaching from the noise environment as taking years. Several staff also reported taking the sounds of the prison home with them, which negatively affected their well-being. Some prisoners explained the steps that they took to try and manage noise. Prisoners requested cell moves, used music or TV to drown out intrusive noise and used earplugs and headphones to exclude unwanted sounds. These efforts suggest some difficulties in dealing with the sound environment. Inevitable sounds seem to be representative of prison life in general and not limited to Five Wells.

Welcomed Prison Sounds

Whilst the above-described sounds were seen as an inevitable and accepted part of prison life, staff and prisoners did not describe them as particularly pleasant, valued or appreciated. However, some sounds were experienced in this way, particularly by prisoners. For example, the sound of keys rattling in the morning were sometimes reported as positive, as this noise indicated that cell doors were about to be opened. A prisoner said, “you know when your day starts because you can hear the keys rattling and you start hearing movement”. Additionally, the sounds of boxes being thrown around and lunch trollies moving were welcomed for making prisoners aware that canteen food was coming.

The importance of sticking to a structured routine was commonly outlined to the research team, by staff and prisoners alike. A set routine was thought to give prisoners certainty, and a sense of control. Additionally, certain activities associated with a routine (such as

time outside of cells and meals) were important and pleasurable moments in the day. Prisoners described actively listening for and using sounds to make sense of their environment, and sounds associated with high points of the day were sought out and welcomed. In this sense we can understand the regular, repetitive but less intrusive sounds of the prison as having a role in reinforcing a sense of stability and security and having a positive impact on prisoner well-being.

Sounds of Normality

Alongside the accepted and appreciated sounds of prison, prisoners also talked about hearing sounds that reminded them of life outside. Five Wells is set in a semi-rural location surrounded, on several sides by green space. The sounds emanating from these surroundings were described by some prisoners and included, wildlife, birds, rustling from animals, and wind. Many of these sounds were said to have a calming effect on prisoners. The sounds of nature compared favourably to prison sounds, with one prisoner concluding that, “hearing birds is better than hearing keys”.

Although Five Wells is semi-rural, some prisoners reported hearing sounds of traffic from the nearest dual carriageway in Northampton. Prisoners expressed mixed feelings towards the sound of traffic, with some prisoners reporting this sound as positive because of its normalising influence. One prisoner noted that the traffic was “a reminder that you are still living in the outside world”. Another prisoner expanded on this by saying ‘it is a bit of normality, isn’t it?’ seeing it as a sign that ‘life’s continuing’ and acknowledging that it would make him less nervous when he encountered it upon release.

There were various areas of the prison, which for prisoners, represented life outside. The gym was reported by prisoners as a place where they experienced a positive sense of normality and escapism due, in part, to the sounds of music playing, weights clanging and prisoners grunting with exertion. The barbershop was another area which was characterised by music playing, hair clippers buzzing, and prisoners talking and laughing. Prisoners in the barbershop revealed that they felt being there was just like getting a haircut on the outside, an experience which allowed them to forget temporarily that they were in prison. Reports such as this confirm that prisoners associate certain sounds with their lives outside and that this can bring them comfort.

Sounds that Remind Prisoners they are in Prison

Prisoners also talked about sounds that reminded them they were in prison. The jangling of keys was reported to evoke feelings of being trapped unless they were being used to unlock cell doors (as described in ‘welcomed sounds’). One prisoner referred to the sound of keys as the “silent killer”, saying it triggered his post-traumatic stress disorder, associating this sound with something bad being about to happen such as discipline or being locked up. Prisoners commonly felt that certain staff rattled their keys loudly to antagonise them, identifying this behaviour as deliberate as some staff were more respectful and did not make as much noise with their keys.

Frustrations were additionally reported with alarms constantly going off, a sound that was immediately noticed by the research team. Prisoners described a sense of powerlessness at not being able to silence the alarms themselves and emphasised their dependence on staff to respond. A similar experience was expressed in relation to the loud music often played by other prisoners. Loud music reminded prisoners that they were in prison because they were unable to locate the source, move away from it, or ask whoever was playing it to turn it down. As with the alarms, they were dependant on prison staff to do this for them. Prisoners acknowledged that alarms and loud music occurred on the outside, however, in those circumstances, more could be done to escape from the sounds.

Finally, as discussed previously, the traffic noise outside of Five Wells was experienced positively by several prisoners. However, other prisoners had a different experience, finding the traffic noise to be loud and irritating, and sometimes a reminder of being in prison because it emphasised something they were no longer a part of. One prisoner reported the sound of traffic as frustrating “because you know it’s out there and you can’t get out there”.

4.4 Theme 3: Community

“It’s not about the building, it’s about the people” – Prisoner

A relationship between a concept of community and the nature of the sound environment quickly became apparent in the fieldwork and was confirmed in the analysis of the data.

This section will explore how sound control was seen as a sign of respect that fostered a sense of community, and how different categories of prisoners, housed together on separate landings, tended to produce particular sound environments.

Sound and Respect

At Five Wells, prisoners are categorised by their status or by a particular need, and those who share specific attributes are housed together on a landing, for instance, those who are peer mentors, in drug recovery, vulnerable or older prisoners. Those new to Five Wells are held on induction landings. The broader ethos of Five Wells, and one of the reasons for housing similar types of prisoners together, has been to establish a sense of social support and connectedness between prisoners who share a living space. Five Wells differs from other prisons in that the houseblock landings, and the prisoners who live on them, are referred to as ‘communities’.

In most Five Wells communities, sound, and controlling one’s own sound making, was seen as a sign of respect necessary for harmonious cohabitation. Communities therefore adopted certain norms surrounding sound, to make the environment suitable for everyone. These norms included ensuring that “music is turned down out of respect for others”, particularly at night, as well as not pressing cell bells unnecessarily or engaging in other loud activities. These actions were perceived by prisoners as a way of showing consideration for the impact one’s own sound-making may have on the well-being of others. One prisoner said: [being noisy] “makes me feel bad as I wonder if I’m being considerate and worry about the impact on others”. Prisoners who made a lot of noise, especially through playing loud music, were repeatedly described as “disrespectful”, “inconsiderate”, “ignorant” and even, “idiotic”. They were also described as winding others up with their noise. All of this led to the conclusion that “noise affects relationships”.

One of the chief complaints surrounding loud music was the way in which it disrupted or prevented people from being able to carry out other important tasks. This was the case for both prisoners trying to maintain contact with friends and family through phone calls and prison officers trying to communicate with prisoners and colleagues as part of their job. One prisoner also described how the loud music of others prevented him from engaging in rehabilitative, educational activities.

Not only was noise and loud music disruptive to important activities, but it was also, at times, experienced as a type of aural assault. One prisoner referred to being a victim of another person's noise and expressed a sense of injustice that they had to endure it as they were "not the abuser". The potential weaponisation of sound was also noticed by staff who recognised that "[prisoners] use loud music to antagonise each other". Whether merely annoying and disruptive or a more egregious, intentional attack, it was evident that loud noise held the potential to erode the community ethos which Five Wells worked hard to establish.

Sound and Different Populations within HMP Five Wells

Whilst noise control was seen as a sign of respect in Five Wells, and loud noise made by others was perceived as disruptive, this did not necessarily mean that all the communities in Five Wells followed the same norms of sound making. Indeed, as the research team were often told by staff and prisoners alike, certain houseblocks were known for a calm and quiet soundscape, while others were infamously hectic and loud. For example, during fieldwork, three houseblocks: Red Well, Buck Well and St John's Well were all repeatedly described as having a quieter sound environment, an observation confirmed through the ethnography. The populations of these houseblocks are limited to vulnerable prisoners and/or prisoners with enhanced privileges, indicating that there may be a link between these populations and their sound-making habits.

Conversely, the houseblocks that housed mainstream prisoners, prisoners on induction, prisoners in drug recovery, prisoners with basic privileges, and the Care and Separation Unit (CSU) were known for having a much louder sound environment (Whyte Well, Whitchurch Well, and Stan Well). Sounds which occurred here included loud music, people kicking their cell doors, screaming, and shouting, and other sounds associated with

antisocial behaviours. In general, the populations in these houseblocks were described by staff as much more “unstable”, and more prone to making noise.

Some staff and prisoners additionally felt that the loudness found here, be that through playing music or using one’s voice, was a way of asserting masculinity, dominance, and status to avoid becoming a target. As one prisoner noted: “You can easily become a target, so you have to assert masculine behaviour to look after yourself”. In an environment which is loud and intimidating, the need to assert oneself through noise is arguably stronger. This could then create a vicious (or virtuous) cycle whereby the noisier houseblocks become even louder and perceived as hostile by prisoners, and the quieter ones remain that way and feel like more of a welcoming community. This variance can exist despite each houseblock having the same physical design and being similarly built to minimise noise, a point which was aptly summarised by one prisoner who commented: “It’s not about the building, it’s about the people”.

Not only did the type of prisoner – and associated noise levels – vary from houseblock to houseblock; they also differed from floor to floor within a houseblock itself, revealing further nuance in the connection between noise, identity, and community. Within Five Wells, prisoners are housed in ascending order of privileges throughout the four floors contained within each houseblock, with those holding the most enhanced privileges inhabiting the fourth floor. Participant accounts, and ethnographic observations, confirmed that the fourth floors were the quietest. They were also the areas where prisoners were most likely to describe feeling a strong sense of community and respect. As one staff member told the research team, prisoners with enhanced privileges are inherently better behaved and therefore quieter. However, the virtuous cycle described above can also be at play in that, being surrounded by well-behaved and quiet prisoners can make it easier to moderate one’s own behaviour and noise level.

4.5 Theme 4: Staffing

“Music blaring...like it is some kind of rave...and no one addressed it” – Staff

“Why am I bothering because I am not going to be able to do this on my own, it needs a whole prison approach” – Staff

A two-way relationship between staffing and the sound environment was identified in the fieldwork and confirmed in the analysis of the data.

This section will explore the impact that short staffing had on the sound environment, how sound affected staff members’ ability to carry out their roles and how a consistent approach in staff practice could reduce noise levels.

Short Staffing

Staff shortages are common across the prison service, and Five Wells is no exception. During fieldwork, staff were noticeably overstretched, and short staffing had several impacts on the sound environment.

There was the issue of prisoners sounding their cell bells¹⁰ for minor issues or to cause annoyance. The beeping of cell bells could be heard throughout the landings and in staff offices. Without enough staff to check in on the prisoner, note whether there was an issue and silence the cell bell, these were often left to ring for long stretches.

At Five Wells, prisoners are supposed to follow a structured routine where they are let out of their cells at set times to attend activities, eat meals, or socialise. Short staffing had inevitable impacts on this routine. As one prisoner said, “routine changes from day-to-day in here”. He explained that there could be delays in being let out of his cell because of staff shortages. This caused frustration and prisoners reported feeling unfairly punished, as one noted: “routine is a big thing in here, it is what you are used to and what you know”. When changes or delays to the routine occurred, this impacted the sound environment as prisoners would kick their cell doors and shout in frustration.

¹⁰ Cell bells are individual buzzers in a prisoner’s cell which are supported to be used to summon staff in emergencies.

Additionally, when prisoners were returning to their landings following activities, there were delays in letting them back in. Doors to the landings can only be opened with keys held by staff members; if there are not enough staff members to do so, prisoners can be left standing outside for extended periods of time, impacting the sound environment. As one prisoner described it, “some have been stood there for half an hour, kicking the life out of the doors, trying to get someone’s attention to get on the wing”. As with delays to the routine, being left outside of the landings inevitably caused frustration and resentment towards staff.

The Disruptive Effect of Noise

The noisy environment at Five Wells was reported to make it difficult for staff to carry out their roles. A commonly mentioned noise disturbance was staff radios. All operational staff at Five Wells carry a radio which allows them to communicate with each other and receive messages from central offices. Unlike some prisons which use a ‘closed radio network’ (where a staff member only hears messages intended for them), Five Wells uses an ‘open network’. This means that staff members hear all the messages being transmitted back and forth throughout the day. Radios are worn on a staff member’s belt. Staff must keep radios at an audible volume or always wear an earpiece. Five Wells tried to implement a closed radio network in 2023 but there were difficulties in setting this up, and after several failed attempts, it was concluded that a closed system would not work in this prison.

The noise from staff radios is constant, whether from messages being transmitted or fuzzing, beeping, and static sounds. Several staff members noted the difficulties posed by this radio noise. One described it as a “massive distraction”, preventing them from focusing on tasks. Another reported becoming “snappy” with other staff members due to the constant low level, irritating noise. Additionally, the radios presented a challenge to staff’s physical and mental well-being. One staff member reported the radio causing headaches. Another reported still hearing the radio noise even at home after work, making it difficult to settle and feeling less present with family, explaining “it just does not stop” and “always upsets me”.

Ironically, whilst staff radios created noise disturbance, the noisy sound environment of the prison also prevented staff from hearing important radio messages. As one staff member reported, the radios are “hard to hear when you’ve got gates closing, doors slamming,

music going, people talking”. Another explained that the issue of not hearing messages was exacerbated by the radio’s open network; having to listen to irrelevant messages all day long meant that staff often zoned the radio noise out and failed to pick up on messages directed at them. Not being able to hear messages on the radio was a potentially significant issue, as important security alerts or calls to attend unwell or injured prisoners could be missed.

A final issue in relation to the open radio network was that “prisoners can hear everything that is going on” including messages about prisoners being moved, violent incidents or alerts calling staff members to other parts of the prison. The implications of prisoners hearing security intelligences posed a significant safety risk.

Negative Staff Practice in Relation to Sound Management

Staff and prisoners alike reported concerns regarding officers not challenging behaviours associated with noise disturbances. These behaviours included loud music being played and vaping on the landings which set fire alarms off. Many staff and prisoners believed that certain staff lacked the experience and confidence to challenge. A staff member reported, it is “to do with new staff, still trying to learn the job, [lacking] confidence and I can imagine they feel a bit intimidated”.

Staff members commonly reported feeling frustrated by the lack of consistency when it came to challenging noisy behaviours. Those that told prisoners to turn music down or stop vaping resented other staff members who did not. As one staff member reported “there are some days where I just think, why am I bothering because I am actually not going to be able to do this on my own, it needs to be a whole prison approach”.

Alongside staff, prisoners also reported feeling frustrated at certain staff members not challenging noise disturbances such as other prisoners’ music. One prisoner reported, music “drives me mad”, noting how it made him feel angry and stressed. Heightening this frustration was a sense of powerlessness and dependency. As such, prisoners felt reliant on staff to maintain a reasonable noise environment on their behalf. When this did not happen, they experienced a sense of ‘double frustration’, firstly at the noise itself and secondly at the failure of staff to protect their well-being. In these instances, the frustration

with staff was often described as greater than the frustration with the prisoner creating the noise.

In addition, prisoners complained that staff themselves perpetuated a negative sound environment. This was done via officers slamming gates, locking doors loudly, and speaking in raised tones at night-time. A further issue was the roll call which occurred early each morning (a process where the staff member on duty must check all prisoners are in their cells with visual confirmation). This process was described as unnecessarily disruptive and noisy, as one prisoner explained “they’ll come in and they’ll open the flap and they’ll either shine a torch right at you or shut the flap and the flap taps against the door”. These disturbances have negative consequences for mood and mental health, emphasising a need for a more considerate approach when roll call occurs.

Positive Staff Practice in Relation to Sound Management

Whilst there were reported inconsistencies in staff challenging prisoners’ noise disturbances, some staff did pride themselves on striving to manage sound levels, despite feeling intimidated. One staff member described the importance of doing so for the sake of the prisoners, “they’ve got to live with each other as best they can and if we can’t be the mediator and resolve whatever issues then we are going to have problems, it’s just going to escalate”. Another staff member reported challenging prisoners with the intention of “leading by example” because “if staff don’t see me doing that, it’s not going to encourage them to do it”. This showed that some staff members tried to improve the sound culture of the prison, despite reported inconsistencies.

5. Conclusion and Considerations

5.1 Summary

The primary aim of this study was to explore the impact that Five Wells physical design features had on the sound environment. This study also explored the impact of other elements (e.g., cultural, social, organisational) on the sound environment. The findings reflect the perspectives of staff and prisoners who participated in this research, their contributions strengthening understanding of sound as an aspect of life at Five Wells.

Four key themes were identified in the analysis and presented in this report. The first was **prison design**, exploring the sounds produced by design features in each area of the prison. This section found that, whilst some elements of the physical design were working as intended to improve the sound environment (e.g., closed landings), others were not (e.g., Cross Well, the gym, and features such as windows and vents).

The second theme related to the **spectrum of sounds** found within the prison environment. This section explored the subjective experience of sound, noting how some sounds were experienced by prisoners as inevitable, some were welcomed and appreciated, some reminded them of life on the outside and served as an escapism, whilst others were a negative reminder of prison life.

The third theme explored the relationship between **community** and the sound environment. This section examined how sound control was considered a sign of respect, facilitating a sense of community; it also looked at different sound environments and their relationships to different populations within Five Wells.

The fourth theme examined the relationship between sound and **staffing**. It explored how short staffing at Five Wells had an impact on the sound environment and how, in turn, sound affected staff members' ability to carry out their roles. It also looked at various negative and positive staff practices when it came to sound management.

5.2 Considerations

Several considerations can be made based on the findings presented in this report. The considerations have been split into two sections: what is working well and should continue, and what is not working as intended and needs further consideration.

5.2.1 What Worked Well

1. Finding: Many staff and prisoners noted that the closed landing houseblocks in Five Wells were much quieter and preferable to the open landings found in older prisons. Prisoners found Five Wells to be less echoey compared with traditional galleried designs.

Consideration: Given staff and prisoner preferences for the quieter sound environments of closed landing blocks, opportunities to design such landings across the prison estate should be explored.

2. Finding: Many prisoners valued the semi-rural location of Five Wells and enjoyed hearing the sounds associated with surrounding nature. Prisoners also enjoyed being in sound environments which provided an escapism from prison life (e.g., the gym, the barbershop, and the multi-faith area). These sounds served as reminders that the outside world still existed, provided a sense of normality, and were valued for the positive effect they had on mental health and well-being.

Consideration: Sounds of nature and activities which mimic normal life outside of prison were reported to provide a sense of normality and imply that access to areas like nature, the gym, the barbershop and the multifaith area can be utilised as a key component of rehabilitative work with prisoners. There is the potential for these sounds to improve the mental health and well-being of prisoners.

3. Finding: Certain areas of the prison were reported to have a good acoustic environment that was well soundproofed (e.g., the multi-faith area and visits hall).

Consideration: Opportunities for prisons to include quiet and tranquil spaces, accessible to prisoners and staff, should be sought out.

4. Finding: Different landings reportedly had different noise levels and environments. Quiet and respectful landings were associated with a much stronger reported sense of community. This was, in part, a product of different groups of prisoners being housed together (e.g., those with enhanced privileges gained through good behaviour were more likely to share a space).

Consideration: Experimenting with integrating prisoners of varying levels of disruptiveness would allow for monitoring of whether better behaved prisoners can have a positive effect on others. This may contribute towards a more controlled and consistent sound environment and an associated positive sense of community across the estate.

5.2.2 What Needs Further Work and Consideration

5. Finding: The main hall, located in Cross Well, can be loud, because of the high levels of traffic it experiences. This presented a problem for nearby facilities including the healthcare waiting area, education, and the library. Also, a purpose-built gym was not part of the blueprint for Five Wells, resulting in G4S converting an industries workshop into a gym which was unsuitable and resulted in noise levels becoming unacceptably high.

Consideration: Building in adequate sound proofing in large open atriums and situating quiet facilities away from central hubs in future prison designs should be considered.

6. Finding: The thick shatter-proof glass used in cell windows often made a loud cracking noise as it expanded and contracted. This could be startling and disturbing to prisoners. Prisoners also reported being able to hear noises (including audible conversations) through vertical pipes and air vents. Information discussed between staff and prisoners could be overheard, weakening security, and making prisoners vulnerable.

Consideration: Further work with suppliers to understand and then eliminate noise issues relating to design features (e.g., barless windows, ventilation, and pipes) should be undertaken, to attempt to mitigate some of the reported-negative impacts on prisoner well-being.

7. Finding: Whilst some sounds were seen as an inevitable part of prison life, others were not. These included staff making excessive noise, particularly at night (e.g., jangling keys, banging gates, speaking loudly) that disrupted the sleep of prisoners and had a significant, reported effect on their mental health and well-being.

Consideration: To make cells calmer and improve prisoner well-being, consider ways for staff to minimise unnecessary noise within their own practice (e.g., keys, banging gates, talking loudly), particularly at night when prisoners are trying to sleep.

8. Finding: Staff and prisoners reported concerns regarding officers not challenging behaviours associated with noise disturbances. In these instances, the frustration at staff was often described as greater than the frustration at the prisoner creating the noise.

Consideration: Results indicate the importance of staff implementing practices that address noise disturbances consistently. Staff having confidence to intervene and effectively challenge prisoners creating loud noise might contribute to a more controlled and consistent sound environment.

9. Finding: Staff reported several issues with the use of an open radio network in Five Wells. Staff reported being distracted by the constant noise of the radio, missing important messages due to information overload, and security issues due to prisoners being able to hear staff communications.

Consideration: Implementing closed radio network systems across prison estates might be worth considering given the findings on the negative impact of an open radio network on both prisoners and staff.

5.3 Conclusion

Five Wells was designed to foster a positive sound environment and there were noticeable improvements in how sound was experienced in the houseblocks, visitor's hall, multi faith room and outside space. Whilst there were many improvements, there were unintended consequences related to certain features and materials, causing unanticipated noise disturbances that impacted staff and prisoners. The MoJ's Evaluation and Prototyping Strategy¹¹ emphasises the importance of timely evidence to help inform decision making.

¹¹ [MOJ Evaluation and Prototyping Strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

This report provides considerations for improving building design, confirming the necessity of a test-learn-adapt model. It is essential that the learning from Five Well's be transferred to future prison designs and extensions.

This study revealed that sound is highly subjective and is inherently linked to memories, emotions, and associations. Sound can be an important feature of normalisation in prison and a key component for rehabilitative work with prisoners. Although sound has previously been overlooked in relation to rehabilitation and resettlement, this report reveals the need for greater consideration when pursuing these objectives.

Sound can be both a symptom of, and can simultaneously worsen, issues found on the prison estate relating to staffing levels and staff practice. For example, whilst loud noise can indicate a lack of staff control over prisoners, a noisy sound environment also makes it difficult for staff members to exercise authority. Whilst detailed suggestions for controlling sound environments are presented in the considerations section, a broader insight from this research relates to the importance of sound, not just for prisoners, but for staff too. Much of the initial design of the PETP focused on improving prisoner outcomes. It is, however, essential that the needs and experiences of staff be equally considered as the NPP continues to roll out.

A key theme running through all the findings in this report relates to how sound, including the ways in which it is experienced and perceived, is not solely a product of the built environment. Sound environments are created through the interplay of spaces, the people who inhabit them, and the cultural and social norms those people enact. This is not, of course, to say that we should not pay attention to the built environment when designing new prisons. It is simply an important reminder that physical environments will have limited impact on outcomes relating to sound if attention is not also paid to cultures and communities.

6. References

Basner M, Babisch W, Davis A, Brink M, Clark C, Janssen S, Stansfeld S. (2014). Auditory and non-auditory effects of noise on health. *Lancet*, 383(9925),1325–1332.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

Gallagher, M. 2011. Sound, space and power in a primary school. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 12(1) pp. 47–61.

Hemsworth, K. (2016). Feeling the range: Emotional geographies of sound in prisons. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 20, 90–97.

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2021). *Annual Report 2020-21*, London: HM Stationery Office.

HMPPS (2023). *HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: June 2023*.

Ministry of Justice (2021). *Prison Education Statistics 2019-20*. London: Ministry of Justice.

Ministry of Justice (2023). *Safety in Custody Statistics quarterly update to March 2023, London: Ministry of Justice. Safety in Custody Statistics Bulletin, England and Wales: Deaths in prison custody to March 2023, Assaults and Self-Harm to December 2022*.

Ministry of Justice (2023). *Safety in Custody Statistics, England and Wales: Deaths in prison custody to September 2023, Assaults and Self-Harm to June 2023*.

Rice, T. (2013). *Hearing the hospital: sound, listening, knowledge and experience*. Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Press.

Rice, T. (2016). Sounds inside: Prison, prisoners and acoustical agency. *Sound Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2(1), 1–15.

Wener, R. (2012). *The Environmental Psychology of Prisons and Jails Creating Humane Spaces in Secure Settings* (1st ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Sound Environment at HMP Five Wells

Staff and Prisoner Views

Woolf, L. J. (1991). *Prison Disturbances. April 1990: Report of an inquiry*. London, England: HMSO.

Xyrichis, A., Wynne, J., Mackrill, J., Rafferty, A. M., & Carlyle, A. (2018). Noise pollution in hospitals. *British Medical Journal*, 363.

Appendix A

Interview Questions for Staff

Overview

1. Are there any sounds/noises that you particularly notice at Five Wells?

Where (in the prison) do these sounds occur?

2. At what time of day or night do they occur?

How are these sounds related to the building features in Five Wells? (prompt: created/ enhanced/ muffled by them)

Impact of sounds

How do these sounds effect you?

Do these sounds ever interrupt your work or prevent you from doing your job? If so, how?

Do noises or sounds ever help you to do your job? If so, how?

3. Do the sounds in Five Wells affect your overall mood? If so, how?

4. Do the sounds in Five Wells affect your behaviour in anyway? If so, how?

5. Do the sounds in Five Wells affect your relationships with other people (other residents or staff)? If so, how?

6. Do you think the sounds in Five Wells impact the residents in any way? If so, how? (prompt: well-being, behaviour, sleep, relationships etc).

Other prisons

7. Have you been in other prisons?

How do the sound and noises in Five Wells differ? Is Five Wells noisier/quieter?

What do you think causes that difference? (prompt: building features, population)

How did the sound in the other prisons affect you? Did it affect your ability to do your job?

8. How did the sound in other prisons affect the residents? (prompt: well-being, behaviour, sleep, relationships etc).

9. How does this compare to Five Wells? (Prompt is the sound environment in Five Wells better/worse for ability to do your job, mood, behaviour, relationships etc. Is it better/worse for the residents?)

Progress/prison experience

(This section should build on the discussion just had re the differences between Five Wells and other prisons, and encourage staff to reflect on the impact of these differences as a whole)

10. Do you think the sound environment of the prison has an impact on the prison experience as a whole *for the men*? If so, how? (prompt, ability to make progress, work on goals, prepare for release etc)

Does it have an impact on your experience as a whole *as an employee*? If so, how? (prompt: ability to progress/develop, work-life balance, motivation, and enjoyment of the job).

Suggestions

11. What do you like best about the sound environment of Five Wells? What is working well?

If you could improve the sound environment of Five Wells in any way, what would you change?

Do you have any other suggestions or anything else you would like to add that we haven't asked you about?

Focus Group Questions for Prisoners

Overview

12. Are there any sounds/noises that you particularly notice at Five Wells?

Where (in the prison) do these sounds/noises occur?

At what time of day or night do they occur?

How are these sounds/noises related to the building features in Five Wells? (Prompt: created/ enhanced/ muffled by them)

Impact of sounds

How do these sounds/noises effect you?

13. Do the sounds/noises in Five Wells affect your overall mood? If so, how?

14. Do the sounds/noises in Five Wells affect your behaviour? If so, how?

15. Do the sounds/noises in Five Wells affect your relationships with other people (other residents or staff, friends/family on the outside)? If so, how?

Does sound or noise ever prevent you from sleeping? If so, what further impact does that lack of sleep have on you?

16. Does sound or noise in Five Wells affect or interrupt any daily activities/routines?

Other prisons

17. Have you been in other prisons?

18. How do the sounds/noises in Five Wells differ? Is Five Wells noisier/quieter?

What do you think causes that difference? (Prompt: building features, population)

19. How did the sounds/noises in other prisons affect you? (Prompt for: Mood? Behaviour? Relationships? Sleep? Daily activities?)

How does this compare to Five Wells? (Prompt: Is the sound environment in Five Wells better/worse for mood, behaviour, sleep, activities etc than other prisons? Why?)

Progress/prison experience

(This section should build on the discussion just had re the differences between Five Wells and other prisons and encourage the residents to reflect on the impact of these differences as a whole).

20. Do you think the sound environment of the prison has an impact on your prison experience as a whole? If so, how? (Prompt: ability to make progress, work on goals, prepare for release etc)

Suggestions

If you could improve the sound environment of Five Wells in any way, what would you change?

The Sound Environment at HMP Five Wells

Staff and Prisoner Views

21. Do you have any other suggestions or anything else you would like to add that we haven't asked you about?