

Written evidence submitted by Mr Keith Chilvers (FWS0142)

The laws have totally failed to keep up with the development of fireworks.

Fireworks have moved from the “penny bangers”, catherine wheels and sparklers of my childhood in the 1950s to multiple firework units that are designed and intended to mimic an artillery barrage.

The current noise limit of 120 decibels is totally inappropriate. 120 decibels is the equivalent of a thunderclap directly overhead, in the case of many of today’s composite fireworks repeated multiple times over a period of two or three minutes.

The explosive power of fireworks has also increased enormously in recent years, giving some fireworks the power to cause very substantial injury to the person and also significant damage to property. It should be a matter of great concern that these potential “bombs” are widely available to the general public.

The existing laws around fireworks are unenforced and largely unenforceable.

The laws regarding the dates during which fireworks may be sold are totally irrelevant since once bought fireworks can be stored to be used at any time. Also fireworks can be bought on-line at any time. Age restrictions are similarly ineffective because as with other age restricted products such as tobacco or alcohol the purchaser is not necessarily the end user.

The laws regarding the discharge of fireworks in public places and between particular dates and specific hours are almost impossible for the police to enforce, and at least here in the East End of London even when police officers see illegal use of fireworks taking place in the streets parks and other public places they seem to prefer to turn a blind eye rather than tackle the gangs of youths responsible (examples of this, quoting dates and times, can be provided on request). Parks and green spaces are frequently found to be littered with the burnt out detritus of fireworks. For four months of the year, from early October to February we suffer from fireworks being discharged at random times day and night, from afternoon when the schools turn out to as late as 4.00am.

The effect of fireworks on the local community

In its replies to previous petitions the government has stated that the majority of people use fireworks “responsibly”. This of course begs the question of how anyone can cause disturbance in their neighbourhood “responsibly”.

The government appears to cling on to a 1950s image of happy family bonfire parties on November 5th with a few Catherine Wheels and Roman Candles. Sadly this is not the experience of people here in Tower Hamlets and Hackney, nor, I suspect, the experience of people in many other parts of the country and certainly not the experience of the police and emergency services.

The reality is that noise and disturbance from high volume random fireworks goes on for four months of the year at any time of the day or night, effecting many people in different ways, from parent trying to get young children off to sleep to ex-service veterans suffering from PTSD. There are also well documented cases of fireworks being used as weapons, even used against the police and emergency services and of house fires being caused by fireworks.

The effect of fireworks on domestic animals and wildlife.

Fireworks are terrifying for many domestic animals. There is a great deal of evidence of domestic pets being lost, injured and even killed as a result of panicking in fear from fireworks. There are also a number of reported cases of domestic pets suffering strokes or heart attacks a result of the terror caused by fireworks. Similarly there is a great deal of recorded evidence of similar effects in relation to horses and farm animals, particularly in the case of horses. The much increased noise of modern fireworks has vastly exacerbated this problem.

There is no collated evidence of the effect of fireworks on wildlife but it is unlikely to be significantly different from the effect on domestic animals. Disturbance to roosting birds must be a particular concern, especially when repeated night after night over a prolonged period.

My personal experiences of the effect of fireworks on animals.

My dog is terrified by the sound and the flashes of fireworks, even at a distance and has become more so over the years as fireworks have got louder. As I live in a flat I need to take him out for a last walk in the evenings to perform the necessary functions before bedding down for the night. If he hears a firework, particularly if it is close by, he will freeze in terror. I often have to carry him home, where it can take him up to an hour to calm down and any hope of him performing what we went out for is gone for the evening.

This is what happens from around the middle of October until February every year. Over this period he becomes more and more wary of going out after dark and it is really not until the lighter evening arrive that he is confident to go out again.

When I know there is a public firework display scheduled I can of course take steps to protect him, by staying indoors until it is over, closing the curtains, allowing him to be in a place where he feels safe, perhaps putting music on to try to drown out the firework noise etc, and as a last resort get him tranquilisers from the vet. In the case of the unpredictable random fireworks which we are subjected to night after night over a period of months there is nothing I can do. This situation causes considerable distress for me and trauma for my dog and is an experience shared by many other people I know.

Public displays versus private.

From the point of view of people who enjoy fireworks plainly public displays are far more spectacular and enjoyable than any display a private individual could ever put on. From a safety point of view these displays are carried out by properly trained licensed operators.

From a cultural point of view the major celebrations where fireworks are traditional, Guy Fawkes night, Diwali, New Years Eve and the Chinese New

Year are in most areas adequately covered by properly organised public displays, thus rendering private displays unnecessary.

In the case of public fireworks displays date time and duration are all publicised. This allows people for whom fireworks are a problem the opportunity to take steps to protect themselves and their domestic pets and livestock from the worst effects of the noise and flashes. Usually in any area there is at least one public display for any given cultural event. This is manageable, it is the unpredictable random fireworks night after night which cause so much problem.

The way forward

Over a period of years governments have shown a worrying level of complacency about the dangers and the nuisance caused by fireworks. At the same time the explosive power and noise levels of fireworks has increased exponentially, as has the abuse of fireworks.

I would now suggest that it is time for government to ban the sale of fireworks to the general public (with the exception of sparklers and similar harmless indoor party devices). I would propose that fireworks should be available only to fully trained licensed operators.

Private displays would still be allowed. The person or persons wishing to put on the display would have to hire the services of a licensed display operator (as do some of the more responsible residents associations in this area) and give due public notice of the date, time and proposed duration of the display.

That would mean that people would be able to safely enjoy fireworks, not just for the main cultural events but also for weddings, birthdays and other celebrations without the nuisance and dangers which we currently experience.

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