

MIKE PITT, employment, company and commercial law specialist, of Oldham's Pearson Hinchliffe, urges employers to keep the noise down.

IN today's high-speed, high-tech world, the "sound" of silence is so unusual that people compose songs about it.

As I write this piece for Legally Bound, I can hear the clickety-clack of my fingers on the keyboard, the humming of my computer, the rumble of a delivery truck making its way up Queen Street, the whirring of a photocopier in the general office and the bleeping of someone else's telephone.

Sounds like this are the background to which the daily lives of thousands of office workers across the town are played out. But according to a recent survey of working conditions, around a third of employees are exposed to potentially dangerous levels of noise for at least a quarter of their time at work, 20 per cent of people have to raise their voices above normal conversation levels for at least half their working hours in order to be heard, and around 7 per cent of individuals consider that their work affects their health in the form of hearing disorders.

It is not only those in heavy industries who are at risk. Noise can be a problem in many working environments, from factories to farms, call centres to concert halls. More than 10 per cent of workers in transport and communications, for example, consider themselves at risk of hearing problems.

From next year, new European Union (EU) rules will set a lower limit of 87 decibels for workers' daily exposure to noise – five decibels lower than the current limit. To give you some idea of what that means, normal conversational speech is 60 decibels, a classroom of primary children typically measures 74 decibels, heavy road traffic is 85 decibels and a pneumatic drill is 100.

The rules also require that, taking into account technical progress and the availability of measures, "the risks arising from exposure to noise shall be eliminated at their source or reduced to a minimum".

The rules must be made law in all EU states by February 15 2006 at the latest. In advance of this, I advise employers to assess the risks to their employees from noise, including carrying out measurements if necessary.

Employers should then take steps to control the risks. Where possible, eliminate the noise source. Otherwise, control exposure to noise at source by, for example, servicing or replacing noisy equipment.

Where controlling noise at source is not possible, employers can reduce workers' exposure to it by, for example, isolating a noisy working area and restricting access to it.

Finally, firms should regularly monitor and review the effectiveness of the measures in place.

One final word of warning: as well as creating hearing problems, excessive noise can cause accidents at work and increase stress levels – either of which can give rise to expensive legal claims.