

TOM WATSON MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Tel: 0207 219 8123

Guy Parker, Chief Executive
Advertising Standards Authority
71 High Holborn
London
WC1V 6QT

18th June 2018

Dear Guy,

I write regarding the Government's advertising of a policy announced over the weekend to give the NHS a funding boost and the misleading use of the phrase 'Brexit Dividend'.

On Sunday the Government announced that as a '70th birthday present' the NHS would receive an extra £20 billion a year by 2023. The Government said the funding increase would be paid for in part by a 'Brexit dividend' and suggested that tax rises would contribute too.

The official 'UK Prime Minister' twitter account which has nearly 6 million followers, tweeted a thread of graphics advertising the policy to the public, including one which read 'Our long-term plan for the NHS funded by the **Brexit dividend**, with us as a country contributing a bit more.' The 'Brexit dividend' was bolded and intended to stand out in the advert.¹

The ASA website states clearly that 'Local authorities, Government and other public bodies should be aware that their ad campaigns, like those of commercial companies, are subject to the rules in the Advertising Codes.' The thread of graphics posted by the UK Prime Minister twitter account was an ad campaign promoting the Government's policy to millions of followers. The website goes on to say 'The ASA will intervene if an ad by a public body crosses the line, whether that's through being harmful, offensive or misleading.... Government departments, local authorities and other public bodies should also ensure that their ads are not misleading and that objective claims are supported by robust evidence.'²

Unfortunately, the 'Brexit dividend' is widely regarded as at best misleading and at worst a complete myth. Experts, such as Paul Johnson the Chief Executive of the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies, have said that any money we will retain as a result of leaving the EU has already been

¹ <https://twitter.com/10DowningStreet/status/1008318646429470723>

² <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/government-and-local-authority-ads.html>



committed elsewhere and that the negative impact on the economy will mean that from an "arithmetic point of view, over this period, there's no money."

Given the importance of the NHS to the millions of people who follow government advertising on the UK Prime Minister twitter feed, I request that you investigate whether the advertising material breaches ASA policy that advertising has to be supported by the 'robust evidence'.

I look forward to your receiving your swift response.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Watson MP

Shadow Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport