

Alex Aiken
Executive Director for Government Communications

1 August 2019

Public information campaign on preparing for Brexit

Dear Alex

As you know, the government has announced plans to spend £138 million on public communications to prepare the UK for leaving the EU with no deal, which is to include a reported £100 million publicity campaign—around £2 for every adult in the country. We assume this will build on the Prepare for Brexit campaign launched in January.

There are specific steps that people and businesses need to take to be ready which have not been taken, and communications can play an important role in encouraging and supporting people and businesses to prepare. We recognise the potential value of this kind of campaign.

However, we recognise concerns from people on all sides of Brexit arguments that a publicity campaign about preparations for leaving could be misused for political purposes, or have unintended political effects.

This would cause real harm, in the first place to preparations for Brexit, and in the longer run potentially to trust in all government communications—damaging vital efforts to tackle public health threats such as drink driving, to promote trade, and so on.

The criticisms by the UK Statistics Authority of figures used in the government leaflet ahead of the EU referendum demonstrate that mistakes can be made, and that these risks are real.¹

As you know very well, the work of the Government Communications Service is bound by the Civil Service Code and the principles of conduct in public life, including honesty, accountability, and

¹ Letter to the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee, 9 June 2016
<https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Letter-from-Sir-Andrew-Dilnot-to-Bernard-Jenkin-MP-9-June-2016.pdf>

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openness. The Government Communications Service is responsible for ensuring that these principles are followed and, as head of the Service, ultimately you are responsible.

I know you will have processes in place to ensure these responsibilities are met and I hope you will agree that this would be a good time to explain them publicly.

Please would you take this opportunity to explain the steps you are taking in three areas?

1. What steps are the Government Communications Service taking to ensure effective governance of the content of any Brexit communications campaign, including transparency, to avoid any inadvertent political effect that could breach the Civil Service Code?
2. What steps are the Government Communications Service taking to fact check the content of the campaign and test it to ensure it does not inadvertently mislead audiences, and how have these been strengthened since the mistakes in 2016?
3. What steps are the Government Communications Service taking to ensure value for money from this campaign, given the GCS's well-known commitment to value for money from, and rigorous evaluation of, all government communication and the scale of the suggested spend in a short time?

I am copying this letter to the chairs of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons; to the Chair of the Committee for Standards in Public Life; to the Comptroller and Auditor General who runs the National Audit Office; and to the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority. We intend to publish it tomorrow.

We at Full Fact wish you and the Government Communications Service all possible success in ensuring that every person and organisation in the UK has the information they need to prepare for the UK leaving the EU.

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As you know, Full Fact works to ensure that everyone has the information they need to make informed decisions according to their own priorities. If we can help you in your important responsibilities I would be glad to discuss how.

Yours sincerely



Will Moy
Chief Executive
Full Fact

cc:

Sir Bernard Jenkin MP, Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Meg Hillier MP, Chair, Public Accounts Committee

Gareth Davies, Comptroller and Auditor General, National Audit Office

Lord Evans, Chair, Committee on Standards in Public Life

Sir David Norgrove, Chair, UK Statistics Authority


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