

How to Challenge Misleading Anti-Wood Stove Campaigns: A Practical Guide

We've all seen the ads attacking wood stoves, blaming them for poor air quality, health issues, and even premature deaths. Yet, thanks to the efforts of the Stove Industry Alliance (SIA), we know the reality: our industry plays only a minor role in air pollution, dwarfed by smoking, vaping, road transport, and tyre wear.

As the owner of HOVE WOOD BURNERS, I recently faced such a challenge when Brighton & Hove City Council (B&HCC) launched a campaign branding wood stoves as "Cosy Killers," claiming they were responsible for "*1 in 20 premature deaths over 30*." I got the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) to rule that the campaign violated their guidelines.

This article outlines the strategy I used — a toolkit you can apply to push back against misleading claims and hold those responsible to account.

Step 1: Use Freedom of Information Requests

I started by submitting two Freedom of Information (Fol) requests to B&HCC:

1. Asking for the scientific studies underpinning the campaign.
2. Requesting details of the campaign's budget and funding sources.

When I reviewed the scientific studies cited, I found that while some summaries loosely supported the campaign's messaging, the full content of the research did not. The evidence simply didn't match the claims.

Step 2: Lodge a Complaint with the ASA

I filed a simple three-word complaint to the ASA via their website: "*It's not true.*" Initially, they dismissed it, saying they couldn't intervene over website content. When I pointed to a print advertisement in a local magazine, they rejected it again.

However, after calling them and explaining that I had the Council's own research (via the Fol request) showing the claims were unsupported, the ASA agreed to investigate. They found the campaign breached their "*denigration*" rules — that is, unfairly attacking an industry — and contacted the Council to 'advise' on the campaign. This opens the door to potential litigation against the Council.

I've since written to B&HCC seeking a meeting to discuss the situation. While they have acknowledged my letter, a meeting has yet to be arranged.

Step 3: Follow the Money

Meanwhile, I discovered the campaign was funded by a DEFRA grant intended to promote Brighton & Hove's smoke control area — not to fund misleading advertising.

I filed a complaint with DEFRA, copied my MP and the Council, and am awaiting a response. Given the ASA's findings, it's hard to see how DEFRA could defend this use of public funds. It could even be considered misconduct in public office.

Lessons Learned

This approach — challenging the evidence and the funding — can be very effective. Whether the campaign comes from a government body, a council, or a private organisation, the method remains the same:

- Use Freedom of Information (Fol) requests for public bodies.

- Use Subject Access Requests (SAR) for private organisations like HETAS.

- Challenge them with their own cited evidence.

- Pressure them by exposing misuse of funds.

Both Fol and SAR requests are free and legally enforceable, usually requiring a response within 30 days.

By standing up to false claims, we not only defend our businesses but also ensure that public debate is based on facts, not fear.

Andy Genovese
HOVE WOOD BURNERS

<https://ico.org.uk/for-the-public/official-information/>

<https://ico.org.uk/for-the-public/getting-copies-of-your-information-subject-access-request/>

<https://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/news/2024/wood-burners-and-open-fires-cosy-killer>