

## OPINION

# Climate Action

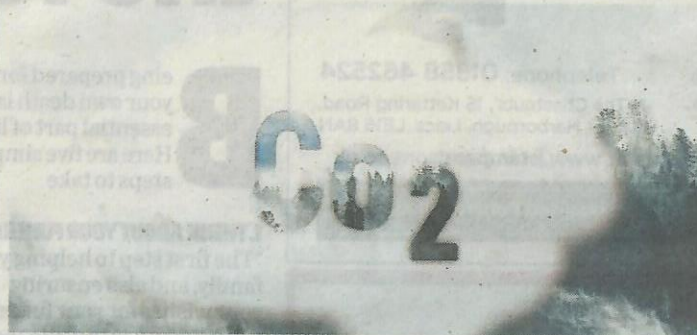
Harborough Climate Action

## Corporate greenwashing – and how it can be tackled

**A** recent vote by the European Parliament will be of interest to all those committed to greening the planet, not least because it has been taken up by our own Advertising Standards Agency.

Virginijus Sinkevičius, the EU Environment Commissioner, wants to target firms that cannot reconcile their marketing zeal with accurate claims about their products. The idea is for greater scrutiny, though what that means in practice remains moot.

The bugbear is 'greenwashing', and it affects all con-



sumers concerned about the environmental credentials of their purchases. 'Greenwashing' amounts to false or misleading claims about the

relationship between products and their production and consumption.

And it's a minefield, even for those with the means to do

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some product research. According to Greenpeace the idea of 'offsetting' – another criterion the ASA will be looking at – is itself a form of greenwashing, not least when it pushes responsibility for controlling climate change on to consumers, instead of calling out large-scale polluters.

We are already familiar with terms such as 'carbon neutral', 'environmentally friendly', and other vague marketing ploys. In future – if all goes to plan – these claims will have to be specifically justifiable, and this will extend to a reconsideration of the relationships between

producers and known polluters. (For example, does your product use oil in its manufacture?) In other words, a 'green' product will have to do what it says on the tin.

The consequences of the ASA initiative are at present rather less clear, though. Naming and shaming may work to smear the reputations of organizations keen on sleight of hand, but will any other consequences follow, and if so, what should they be?

The lesson here is interconnectedness: alongside accurate and truthful advertising we all need to be aware of the contexts in which consumerism takes place, and that all purchases within the apparent necessity of economic growth have an environmental impact somewhere along the line. The difficult trick is to make sure that economic expansion and environmental sustainability work together, rather than at loggerheads.