



Joined up Government or brazen propaganda?

There are a number of electronic display boards known as Matrix signs which are located at points leading up on to the Mountain Road such as in Tholt-y-Will, Sulby and at Barregarrow, Kirk Michael and at Cronk-Ny-Mona, Douglas.

These digital signs usually display factual weather information for the assistance of motorists such as "Warning Ice" or "High Winds" or "Fog use Headlights".

However, over the last couple of years they have also occasionally displayed very different messages, questionable statements such as "Stay home. Stay safe" or "Police now recruiting" or "Under 12's walk in Covid vaccination now available".

Last week (the week commencing Monday 10th October 2022) the Matrix signs displayed the message shown in the above photograph namely, "**Covid-19 Vax Autumn Booster info. Check gov.im**".

You may be curious about this messaging. For instance, who owns these Matrix signs? Who decides what messages are displayed? And can anyone object to the content displayed?

See Freedom of Information reply from Department of Infrastructure dated 27th January 2022.

It transpires that the signs are owned by the DOI but that any Government Department is permitted to place messaging (free of charge) on the signs subject to the permission of the Director of Highways or Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Infrastructure.

The Covid-19 vaccination Autumn Booster programme has already been widely advertised in the local media, on the government's website and by a direct mailshot to relevant households.

Some people have genuine concerns about the safety, necessity and ethics of Covid-19 vaccination but of course if people wish to receive the Autumn Booster and give informed consent there can be no objection.

But why is it considered appropriate to promote Autumn Covid Boosters on what are essentially road traffic signs? Moreover, the Matrix signs are publicly owned, not akin to privately owned billboards where advertising on any subject can be legitimately paid for.

On the one hand some citizens may be pleased and say that the vaccination messaging on the Matrix signs is a good example of joined up government, simply one branch of government (the Department of Health and Social Care) working with another branch of government (the Department of Infrastructure).

On the other hand, some citizens are disturbed and say that it is improper to use road traffic signs for vaccine messaging; that to use the signs as a form of social conditioning or persuasion is at best heavy-handed public relations and at worst brazen propaganda.

Clearly, the Matrix signs are primarily intended to give updated information to motorists about the weather and surface conditions on the Mountain Road. To go beyond that and in effect promote one side of a contentious public health (that Covid boosters are beneficial) is considered by some to be inappropriate and wrong.

If vegans wished a "*Save our lambs*" message displayed on the Matrix signs or Extinction Rebellion wanted a "*Don't drill for gas*" statement shown, would these controversial communiques be deemed acceptable for government signage?

The FOI reply dated 27th January 2022 from the DOI stated that the personal authority of either the Director of Highways or the CEO of the DOI is required to be sought before authorisation is given for messaging to appear on the Matrix signs.

The present Director of Highways is Mr Jeffrey Robinson, Eilerslie Depot, Crosby IM4 2HA. The interim CEO of the DOI is Miss Emily Curphy, Head Office, Sea Terminal, Douglas, IM1 2RF. Both can be emailed via enquiries@highways.gov.im. Alternatively, the DOI Minister is Mr Chris Thomas, MHK for Douglas Central, email chris.thomas@gov.im.

No doubt, these public officials will be delighted with any feedback or suggestions about political messaging to be displayed on the Matrix signs. Or perhaps upon reflection they will say that they had better just stick to mentioning the weather.

See our FOI page for the full DOI response.