

## Written evidence submitted by HM Government (CTR 04)

### Correcting the record

The Government welcomes the Committee's work relating to the process by which Ministers and backbench members correct the parliamentary record, and looks forward to engaging on proposals that may improve the system, particularly as it relates to all Members.

The obligation on Ministers to ensure that the information they provide to Parliament is accurate is set out in the Ministerial Code and in the House's resolution on ministerial accountability. Ministers take this obligation seriously. Corrections should be made in a way that is transparent and open, not only for the Member but also for others, including the general public.

#### Whether the House's corrections system is being used as intended

The current system for Ministerial corrections is well established following the House's approval of the 2007 Procedure Committee report on the subject, and the Government believes that the processes relating to Ministerial corrections are generally effective and being used as intended. If the Committee or House authorities believe there are technical improvements that could be made to improve this, this would of course be welcomed by the Government.

The Ministerial Code requires ministers to correct any inadvertent errors at the earliest opportunity. As set out in Erskine May (Part 3, Paragraph 22.23):

When factual mistakes are discovered in an answer to a question, Ministers may submit written ministerial corrections for publication in the House papers and online. Such corrections are required to be free-standing and should not be used to provide new information, however closely related to the original proceeding. Nor should they be used to rehearse the arguments which may have given rise to the original erroneous answer. When Ministers wish to make a correction in terms which would not comply with the criteria relating to written ministerial corrections, they may do so by means of a written statement.

Whilst the method by which a ministerial correction is made will be a judgement for the relevant minister, based on the particular circumstances, corrections should be made in a way that is transparent and open, not only for the Member but also for others, including the general public. The correction should be free-standing and a correction letter should be headed by the name of the Minister in whose name the correction is being made; make clear the proceedings in which the original error occurred, with accurate date, column number, and volume number; set out the original passage; and set out the terms of the error. A department should also write to the Member concerned, if the correction involves a statement directly made to a particular Member. Where very minor corrections are required, which do not alter the meaning of the original text, the Government believes these should continue to be made editorially by Hansard.

It is ultimately the responsibility of individual Members to ensure that they uphold the standards required of holders of public office and the provision of accurate information in respect of policies and actions is, of course, a key component of ministerial accountability to Parliament. Although Members of the House who are not Ministers of the Crown are not scrutinised in the same way, both the Official Opposition and indeed all Members are expected to observe the Seven Principles in Public Life. As public office holders, Members must adhere to the standards of accountability and openness and have a similar responsibility to provide accurate information. As such, the Government thinks it is reasonable that all Members be subject to similar requirements in relation to the correction of inadvertent errors and that, therefore, there is merit in considering options for extending the formal process for corrections so that it is available to all Members. At the very least, the Committee may wish to consider whether there is more that can be done to ensure that all members take the opportunity to correct inadvertent mistakes, for example by way of point of order or in a future debate.

#### What procedural opportunities MPs have to challenge the accuracy of information provided by Ministers to the House

It is for all Members of Parliament to account for what they say in the House of Commons, regardless of their position. Aside from the existing procedures that relate to Ministers, all Members have the ability to suggest corrections to their speeches to the Official Report and the MPs' Guide to Procedure sets out how they should contact Hansard reports. Members cannot make substantial alterations to the meaning of what they said.

The Government believes there are adequate routes for challenging the accuracy of information provided by Ministers to the House. Where MPs wish to challenge information provided by Ministers to the House there are countless ways to do this, including during proceedings in the Chamber, committees and through correspondence. Ultimately, where an inaccuracy has been identified and a Minister has been informed, it should be corrected as soon as possible. The Government would be interested in considering the Committee's suggestions for further procedural opportunities, if it thinks this is required by the House.

Without the same procedural opportunities to correct the record, MPs have also often sought to do so by a point of order, however, this mechanism has obvious shortcomings, not least that it does not allow cross-references to be inserted into the Official Report. Options to address this could be considered by the Committee.

#### Whether and how the visibility of corrections made to Hansard could be improved

The Ministerial Corrections page on the Hansard website ensures transparency in the corrections process where Ministers have made inadvertent errors. If there are further technical changes the House authorities can make to further improve the transparency of these corrections, this would of course be a positive step.

Ministerial corrections are required to be free-standing and should not be used to provide new information, however closely related to the original proceeding. Nor should they be used to rehearse the arguments which may have given rise to the original erroneous answer. When Ministers wish to make a correction in terms which would not comply with the criteria relating to written ministerial corrections, they may do so by means of a written statement, which helps to ensure the corrections are clear and visible. Many of the circumstances in the

past in which a WMS was used should now be covered by the existing corrections procedure, however, the Committee may wish to consider whether WMS corrections could also be more clearly cross-referenced to the original proceeding, in consultation with Hansard's Editors.

The Government's priority is that the process ensures transparency and that the visibility of corrections made to the Official Report is sufficient. The Government is satisfied that, when it is used appropriately, this is the case for the process of ministerial corrections but the Committee may consider the current options for other Members as an area which could be improved.

Whether a wider range of corrections and clarifications should be recorded

The Government is satisfied that the terms set out in Erskine May (Part 3, Paragraph 22.23) is a sufficient criteria for corrections and clarifications. Again, the Committee may want to consider whether this should apply to all members.

Whether backbench MPs should have more formal opportunities to correct statements that they make in the House

As set out above, it is important that we have clear and transparent processes when MPs make inadvertent errors. The Government thinks that there is merit in considering whether it would be worth extending the formal process for Ministerial corrections to all Members. All Members have a responsibility to provide accurate information and the Government believes this could improve clarity and transparency of corrections. The lack of a formal mechanism for backbench MPs means there is no clear way of identifying and linking an original statement to the correction given and the public should not have to work their way through Hansard before finding the correction. The Committee, therefore, may wish to bring forward recommendations to the House on this matter and the Government looks forward to further engagement with the Committee.