

## Written evidence submitted by Full Fact

## Summary

- Full Fact is grateful for the opportunity to provide evidence to the Modernisation Committee and make suggestions on what we think the committee should focus on.
- Full Fact believes that in order to fulfil the objective of 'raising standards', the Modernisation Committee should take further action on existing inquiry recommendations made by the Procedure Committee and the Standards Committee, the details of which we have outlined below.

## About Full Fact

1. Full Fact fights bad information. We're a team of independent fact checkers, technologists, researchers, and policy specialists who find, expose and counter the harm it does.
2. Bad information ruins lives. It promotes hate, damages people's health, and hurts democracy. So, we tackle it in four ways. We check claims made by politicians, public institutions, in the media and online. We ask people to correct the record where possible to reduce the spread of specific claims. We campaign for system changes to help make bad information rarer and less harmful, and we advocate for high standards in public debate.
3. Full Fact is a registered charity. We're funded by individual donations, charitable trusts, and by other funders. We receive funding from both Meta and Google. Details of our funding can be found on our website.<sup>1</sup>

**What topic(s) do you think the Modernisation Committee should prioritise and how do they link to one or more of the strategic aims set out in the Leader's memorandum?**

1. Full Fact believes that in order to promote trust in politics and raise standards in public life, politicians need to ensure accuracy is at the forefront of their work. Full Fact has long campaigned for a greater use of the correction system and through our fact checking work, we ensure mistakes are raised with members of parliament.
2. We welcome the strategic aim of 'raising standards' set out in the Leader's memorandum and believe that this presents a key opportunity to review the success of the implementation of the Procedure Committee's inquiry on correcting the

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<sup>1</sup> Full Fact, Funding, 2022, <https://fullfact.org/about/funding/>

record. In April 2024, both MPs and Ministers were given equal opportunity to correct the official record through a point of order and a written correction to Hansard.

3. The full effectiveness of the correction system can't be measured by Full Fact alone. Given it is not possible for us to monitor and fact check all claims made by politicians, it is not accurate to draw comparisons about the overall behaviour of individual MPs or political parties. However, since implementation of the new system, we can point to a number of examples where the new system wasn't utilised despite inaccuracies being raised with the individual and their team. For example, on December 13 Full Fact wrote to Sir Keir Starmer asking him to clarify his use of the word "convictions" at PMQ, or correct the record.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in November 2024, we wrote to Kemi Badenoch after her first PMQs when she wrongly claimed Labour's Budget did not mention defence.<sup>3</sup> This was incorrect, but Ms Badenoch has not corrected the record. At the time of submitting this submission neither the Prime Minister nor the Leader of the Opposition have corrected the official record.
4. Under current procedures, even a Prime Minister—to whom the Ministerial Code applies—can ignore requests to correct the record. A key example of this happened under Boris Johnson's premiership, when a claim prompted action by Full Fact, the Office for Statistics Regulation, the UK Statistics Authority, the Liaison Committee, over 18,000 members of the public, and Johnson still refused to officially correct the record.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, there are no meaningful repercussions for a Prime Minister, other ministers or MPs who fail to correct a false or misleading claim soon after being informed about it.
5. Given this, we believe the Modernisation Committee could play a vital role in both promoting this system, but also exploring whether the code of conduct does enough to ensure members are bound to honesty and accuracy. While the Nolan Principles explicitly references an obligation to be honest, we believe that promoting 'accuracy' is also of great importance. The quality of debate in the House relies on statements being accurate or being corrected retrospectively if an inaccuracy occurs.
6. The Chair of the Standards Committee, Alberto Costa MP, also a member of this committee, recently raised in an interview with Politics Home that he is interested in the idea of MPs taking "taking an oath on the Nolan principles".<sup>5</sup> While Full Fact believes this would not go far enough to *enforce* the Nolan principles, it would be a strong step in promoting these standards and we would welcome the committee exploring further.
7. The way in which these rules are governed must also be factored into the committee's thinking. Compassion in Politics reports that 76% of the public would back a specific criminal offence covering politicians who lie, with over 200,000 signatures on their petition to bring in such an offence. This was then supported by

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<sup>2</sup> Full Fact, 13 December 2024, PoliticsLive, <https://fullfact.org/live/2024/dec/starmer-convictions-pmq/#jump>

<sup>3</sup> Full Fact, 06 November 2024, <https://fullfact.org/news/kemi-badenoch-defence-budget/>

<sup>4</sup> Boris Johnson MP, 30 March 2022, The Liaison Committee, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/10037/default/>

<sup>5</sup> Politics Home, 2024, <https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/i-never-saint-alberto-costa>

the Sennedd, where the Standards Committee is currently considering evidence on whether deception should be made an offence.

8. This research demonstrates public demand for more accountability and transparency of MPs and the claims they make in the course of their work. While Full Fact does not believe a new specific criminal offence would be an effective or measured course of action, which we also outlined in our evidence session to the Sennedd, the Compassion in Politics petition does demonstrate significant public outcry at the problem of honesty in public life and underlines the need for change.
9. Ensuring that the system which allows all MPs to easily correct is widely utilised would help to improve the situation and increase constituents' faith in their Members of Parliament. This is a vital step in achieving the Leader's stated goal of improving standards.

### **On Social Media:**

10. Alongside the correction system, another area in which Full Fact would be interested in the committee exploring is guidance for members of parliament on their usage of social media. Currently, the code of conduct does not set out best practice for social media and only looks at what is said in the House. However, with social media reaching larger audiences and used as a tool to promote one's work, we believe the Committee has an opportunity to explore whether more can and should be done to establish greater honesty and accuracy in British politics, and to rebuild public trust.
11. When pointing out inaccuracies made by members of Parliament on social media, Full Fact have found that MPs are less likely to issue a correction, versus if the claim is made in the House. We believe that this is due to there being a clear mechanism for corrections in the House, which doesn't exist on social media.<sup>6</sup>
12. If an MP corrects a social media post, as was done by Josh MacAlister MP over an inaccuracy on waiting lists<sup>7</sup>, they are doing so outside of the scope of the rules. If the committee were to consider a culture of correction, work would need to be done to ensure these rules have their scope extended to social media and in the media.
13. While we appreciate that MPs already have rules on not bringing the house into disrepute, more needs to be done to promote good practice. This is not an easy task and will require further consultation and thought, but we believe that this is a matter of great importance and will ensure the rules that govern parliament are reflective of a digital age.

### **Why would the topic(s) benefit from the attention of the Modernisation Committee?**

1. The Modernisation Committee benefits from bringing together key voices from across the political spectrum and well as the various select committees. The issues we have raised would build on the existing work of both the Standards Committee and the Procedure Committee and review how well the recommendations are being effectively implemented.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information, please read chapter 9 of the 2024 Full Fact Report: <https://fullfact.org/policy/reports/full-fact-report-2024/#part-2-trust-politics-and-government>

<sup>7</sup> Full Fact, 1 November 2024, <https://fullfact.org/live/2024/nov/new-MP-corrects-NHS-waiting-list-error/#jump>

**Are you aware of examples from other Parliaments relevant to the topic(s) which may be interesting for the Modernisation Committee to consider?**

N/A

**Is there any existing work relevant to the topic(s) which you think the Modernisation Committee can build on?**

N/A

December 2024