



House of Commons  
Procedure Committee

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# Corrections to the Official Report

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**Second Report of Session 2006–07**

*Report, together with formal minutes and  
written evidence*

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## Procedure Committee

The Procedure Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business, and to make recommendations.

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Mr David Gauke MP (*Conservative, South West Hertfordshire*)  
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The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 147. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publication

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/proccom>. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Parliament is at the back of this Report.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Mr Mark Hutton and Mr Keith Neary (Clerks) and Susan Morrison (Committee Assistant).

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## Summary

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Ministers are accountable to Parliament for the Government's policies and actions. As a consequence they provide the House of Commons with a great deal of information. Under the Ministerial Code and the House's resolution on Ministerial Accountability to Parliament they have a responsibility to ensure that that information is correct. This responsibility is taken seriously by the Government, but from time to time errors are made. Considering the amount of information provided, these occasions are rare.

Currently there are various ways in which Ministers may correct such inadvertently made errors. Some of these are not widely publicised and can be difficult to track down. We believe that this is unsatisfactory. Since the mistakes are recorded in the Official Report (Hansard), the corrections should appear there too. There should also be clearer links between the error and the correction.

We therefore recommend that there should be a dedicated section of Hansard in which all corrections should appear. This 'corrections page' should be published whenever a correction is made. It should be separately identified in the table of contents and have its own column numbering.

We recommend that it should be used for corrections to errors made by Ministers in any proceedings in the Chamber (e.g. including answers to written and oral questions, statements and debates), in Westminster Hall and, in some circumstances, in general committees. It should also be used by other Members who answer on behalf of certain bodies (such as the House of Commons Commission and the Church Commissioners).



# Corrections to the Official Report

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## The Problem

1. Ministers provide Parliament with a great deal of information. They answer both oral and written parliamentary questions. They make statements on the floor of the House and in writing. They contribute to debates of all sorts. Inevitably there are occasions when some part of that information turns out to have been mistaken. When such mistakes occur, Ministers are under an obligation to correct them. The House's resolution on Ministerial Accountability states:

It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

The Ministerial Code places a similar requirement on Ministers:

it is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity. Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister.<sup>2</sup>

2. In this short report we are concerned only with the procedures and mechanisms by which Ministers may correct inadvertent errors which they accept they have made. We do not intend to make any change to the procedures by which Ministers are held to account for deliberately misleading the House. We are separately conducting an inquiry into Written Parliamentary Questions in the course of which we will consider the procedures for the answering of questions and what opportunities should be available to Members to pursue answers with which they are not satisfied.

3. We have addressed this matter in part at the instigation of the Leader of the House, Rt Hon Jack Straw MP. He wrote to our Chairman proposing that we should consider the establishment of a separate corrections page in the Official Report (Hansard).<sup>3</sup> But that letter was not the start of the process. The matter had been raised with us by Mr Andrew Selous MP in December 2005.<sup>4</sup> We had followed it up in correspondence with the then Leader of the House. It was in response to that correspondence that the Leader of the House wrote to us in January this year. We took up his proposal and consulted the relevant House authorities. We received their response in March.<sup>5</sup> We are grateful to them for the work they have done in identifying the key issues. This report builds on their memorandum.

4. There are currently five ways in which written corrections can be made. These are described in full in the memorandum from the Editor of Hansard and the Principal Clerk,

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1 CJ (1996-97) 328.

2 Ministerial Code 2007, paragraph 1.15.

3 Ev 1

4 Ev 1

5 Ev 2

Table Office (referred to throughout the remainder of this report as ‘the Memorandum’). In summary they are—

- A letter to the Editor pointing out a minor error which does not alter the meaning of the passage and which is then corrected in the Bound Volume of Hansard.
- A pursuant answer. This method (which can only be used to correct an error in the answer to a parliamentary question) requires the agreement of the Table Office and is restricted to ‘relatively inconsequential matters of fact (figures and dates).’<sup>6</sup>
- An ‘inspired’ question, tabled on behalf of the Minister and which provides an opportunity to correct an answer previously given or a statement previously made.
- A letter to the Member to whom the original incorrect information was given explaining that an error was made and giving the correct information. A copy of the letter is also placed in the Library. The correction is recorded in the Library information system (PIMS), but there is no record of it in Hansard.
- A written ministerial statement. This is the most immediately transparent method of correction, although, as we discuss below, even this does not provide the clear link between the original error and its correction which we would ideally like to see.

5. There is, as far as we are aware, no authoritative guidance on which of these procedures would be appropriate for specific categories of error. Mr Selous in his original letter to our Chairman drew attention to the differing practices of two government departments which had made similar errors.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, because there are several available options, there is no simple way of discovering whether a correction has been made. Corrections which are made by means of a letter sent to the Member and placed in the Library are not generally available to anyone outside the Palace of Westminster.

## Our proposal

6. We agree with the proposal of the Leader of the House that there should be a separate corrections page in Hansard. The Memorandum sets out what would be the practical arrangements for such a page. It also poses three questions for our consideration:

- What should be its scope (ie what sorts of corrections and from whom)?
- When should it be published?
- What rules should there be on the content of corrections?

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6 Ev 2

7 Ev 1

## Scope

7. The letter from the Leader of the House focuses on errors in ministerial ‘written (and possibly oral) answers.’<sup>8</sup> It is clear that the vast majority of cases which Members raise with Mr Speaker relate to the answers to questions. Corrections by way of pursuant answers can of course only be made to errors in earlier answers. But errors can be made in other contexts, such as statements and speeches in debate. The Memorandum suggests that a corrections page should include:

written and oral answers, including those given in response to statements and urgent questions, written ministerial statements, and anything said by a Minister in that capacity in the Chamber or Westminster Hall.<sup>9</sup>

We agree with this approach. If the House is to establish a dedicated page for corrections, its scope should not be artificially restricted to a few specific types of proceeding. Indeed we would go further. We believe that, if a Minister makes an error in a general committee and does not have an opportunity to correct it in the course of that committee’s proceedings (for example, because the committee is a public bill committee and consideration of the bill is completed before the error is noticed), the error should be corrected by means of the corrections page.

8. The Memorandum also argues that the corrections page should include corrections to answers ‘made in an official capacity by those non-ministerial Members who answer on behalf of various statutory bodies—for example, the Church Commissioners and the House of Commons Commission.’ The purpose of any corrections page should be to ensure that, if an error is made, there is an open and well-understood procedure for its correction and for the publication of that correction. It is likely given the nature of parliamentary business that the majority of errors will be made by Ministers. The provision of accurate information in respect of policies and actions is, of course, a key component of ministerial accountability to Parliament. But where other Members have a similar responsibility to provide accurate information, they should be subject to similar requirements as to the correction of inadvertent errors. We agree with the Memorandum that corrections from non-ministerial Members who have formal responsibilities to answer in the House on behalf of a body should be included in the corrections page.

## Publication

9. 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 very seriously. Considering the amount of information involved, significant errors are rare. Corrections are not an everyday occurrence. The Memorandum suggests that the publication of corrections might be held back to a specific day of the week. This would provide a predictable time when Members could check for any relevant corrections.

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8 Ev 1

9 Ev 3

10. We understand these arguments of convenience, but we do not believe that the consequence would be consistent with the obligation which the House places on Ministers to correct any error ‘at the earliest opportunity.’ Some errors, once spotted, require urgent correction. They may for example be relevant to a matter or to legislation which is currently before the House. We therefore propose that corrections should be published as soon as they are received. This would introduce a small element of unpredictability, but if the corrections are to have a separate section in Hansard with their own column numbering, they will not be difficult to find and their presence will be indicated in the list of contents on the back of each daily part.

11. In our view this should be sufficient to ensure that Members are aware of any relevant corrections. An additional possibility would be for Hansard to email all Members whenever a correction is published. However, many corrections are very minor (for example, where they are to specific figures in lengthy tables of routinely provided data). Members receive very many emails and we do not wish to add unnecessarily to the congestion in their inboxes.<sup>10</sup>

### **Content**

12. The Memorandum suggests that each correction should reproduce the texts of the original question and answer, or the original passage from debate, followed by the text of the correction.<sup>11</sup> We agree. A correction should be free-standing. It should set out what the original error was, in what circumstances it was made (e.g. in reply to a written question), and how it is being corrected. There should be a clear cross-reference to the error itself. We discuss cross-referencing further in paragraphs 16 and 17 below. The correction should be headed by the name of the Minister by whose authority it is being made, as for written ministerial statements.

13. Errors can come in many different forms. Corrections may be similarly various. But a corrections page should be used only for corrections. It should not be an occasion to provide new information, however closely related to the original proceeding. Neither should it be used to rehearse the arguments which may have given rise to the original error. Currently pursuant answers have to be cleared with the Table Office to ensure that they are used only for the narrow purposes for which they are intended. This is a relatively informal procedure which, in our view, causes little inconvenience to either the government department or the Table Office. We believe that it would be sensible to extend this procedure to all corrections to be made using the new procedure.

### **Minor corrections**

14. The Memorandum set out five categories of correction. The first of these is to a minor error where the correction does not alter the meaning of the passage, and where the error ‘normally, but not exclusively’ has been made by the Official Report. These corrections are made silently in the Bound Volume and the version of the Hansard on the website is

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<sup>10</sup> See Administration Committee, Second Report of Session 2006–07, *Information and Communication Technology Services for Members*, paras 116–118.

<sup>11</sup> Ev 3

altered when the Bound Volume is published. We do not believe that this category of error needs to be included in a corrections page, as long as the alteration remains editorial rather than substantive. Where the correction is to an answer, it will be good practice for the Minister also to inform the Member who asked the question. We are content that the arrangements for the correction of this category of errors should remain unchanged.

### **Communication with the Member**

15. One of the principal purposes of a dedicated corrections page is to make it easier for Members and the public to find where an error has been made and what the correct information is, but this must not be achieved at the expense of the Member whose original question or intervention gave rise to the error. At present corrections made by letter are sent to the Member concerned as well as to the Library, as are pursuant answers. It is essential that this practice is carried forward to the new arrangements. Ministers must ensure that the Member, whose question or intervention gave rise to an error which is to be corrected in the corrections page, is informed of that correction before its publication in Hansard.

### **Cross-referencing**

16. A corrections page operating as we have proposed would provide a clear link from a correction to the original error. It would not, however, provide the complementary and equally important link from the error to the correction. The Memorandum proposes that, in the electronic version of Hansard, 'Hyperlinks would be inserted between the original text where it originally appeared and the corrections section.'<sup>12</sup> We welcome this proposal, but we would like to go further.

17. The Bound Volume is the long-term authoritative version of Hansard. It is normally published some months after the period it covers. Most inadvertent errors are identified within weeks, if not days, of being made. In the vast majority of cases it should be possible also to insert a cross-reference from the error to the correction in the Bound Volume.

### **Implementation**

18. The Memorandum notes that the introduction of a corrections page will require new software which may take some weeks to develop. There may also be some additional costs both from the publication of the page itself and as a result of introducing hyperlinks for cross-referencing in the electronic copy. These will need to be properly quantified. Accordingly we propose that the corrections page should be introduced from the start of the next session of Parliament, which is likely to be in November 2007.

### **Recommendation**

**19. We recommend that a dedicated corrections page be introduced in the Official Report (Hansard). It should be used for all corrections to inadvertent errors of fact made by Ministers and other Members who provide information to the House in an**

official capacity. Very minor corrections which do not alter the meaning of the original text may continue to be made editorially by Hansard. The corrections page should have its own column numbering and suffix.

20. This procedure should replace the use of letters placed in the Library, pursuant answers, 'inspired' questions and written ministerial statements. As with written ministerial statements, all corrections must be made in the name of a Minister (or other Member, as appropriate).

21. The corrections page should be used for corrections to errors made in the Chamber, in Westminster Hall and in general committees, where there is no opportunity to correct them during the proceedings of that committee.

22. Corrections should be published at the earliest opportunity.

23. The Member who asked the question or made the speech or intervention which gave rise to the error should be informed of the correction before it is published.

24. Each correction should be free-standing. It should set out what the original error was, in what circumstances it was made (e.g. in reply to a written question), and how it is being corrected. There should be a clear cross-reference to the error itself. It should not be used to provide new information or to continue an argument. The Table Office should check all corrections before publication for compliance with these rules (which are set out in more detail in paragraphs 12 and 13 above).

25. As well as cross-references from the correction to the error, there should be, wherever possible, cross-references from the error to the correction. These should be by hyperlink in the electronic version.

26. This procedure should be introduced from the start of the 2007–08 parliamentary session.

# Formal Minutes

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**Wednesday 23rd May 2007**

Members present:

Mr Greg Knight, in the Chair

Ms Celia Barlow

Mr Christopher Chope

Mr David Gauke

Andrew Gwynne

Mr John Hemming

Mrs Siân James

Rosemary McKenna

Sir Robert Smith

Mr Rob Wilson

## **1. Corrections to the Official Report**

Draft Report (Corrections to the Official Report), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 26 read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That certain Memoranda be appended to the Report.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 13 June at 2.30 pm.]

## List of written evidence

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1	Letter from Andrew Selous MP	Ev 1
2	Letter from Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, Leader of the House of Commons	Ev 1
3	Paper from the Editor of the Official Report and the Principal Clerk, Table Office, House of Commons	Ev 2

## Reports from the Procedure Committee since 2005

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The following reports have been published during this Parliament:

### Session 2006–07

First Report	Public Petitions and Early Day Motions	HC 513
Second Report	Corrections to the Official Report	HC 541

### Session 2005–06

First Report	Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill	HC 894
Second Report	Application of the <i>sub judice</i> rule to proceedings in coroners' courts	HC 714

# Written evidence

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## Letter from Andrew Selous MP (P45 (Session 2005–06))

### MINISTERS MISLEADING THE HOUSE

I write to seek the Procedure Committee's guidance on how ministers should respond when they have misled the House at the Despatch Box. It has come to my attention recently that different departments are reacting in different ways and as a Member I find it unacceptable that Departments of State can decide how they will correct the record when their ministers have misled the House at the Despatch Box.

At Treasury questions in November the Chief Secretary to the Treasury misled the House in a supplementary answer to my question on the Order Paper. After correspondence between us the Chief Secretary acknowledged to me that he had misled the House and placed a letter in the Library of the House correcting his inaccurate answer. As it happened his inaccurate answer to my question had been picked up on *Today* and *Yesterday in Parliament* on Radio 4 and had been broadcast to the nation. I therefore find it wholly unacceptable that a major Department of State can merely slip a letter into the Library which very few people are ever likely to come across.

More recently, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued a written ministerial statement which obviously appeared on the Order Paper to correct an inaccurate oral answer. Thus, two Departments of State have behaved differently over essentially the same matter.

I have always taken the view that to mislead the House, even unintentionally, is an extremely serious offence and that it is not acceptable for ministers not to regard it as such. I would like to see a ruling from the Procedure Committee that when the House is misled from the Despatch Box a correction is given to the House also from the Despatch Box. I think there is also a case for ensuring that the correct answer is given at a time of day that will pick up as much media exposure as the original incorrect answer received when it was given to the House. I really do feel very strongly about these issues and believe that they touch on the reputation and standing of parliament and Members in general. You will be aware as I am that we are held collectively in pretty low esteem by the public and I do think that the measures that I suggest would go a little way to correcting that impression. I look forward to hearing back from you once your Committee and its clerks have had a chance to consider this letter.

*December 2005*

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## Letter from Rt Hon Jack Straw MP, Leader of the House of Commons (P14)

### CORRECTIONS TO THE OFFICIAL REPORT

We have not yet had the opportunity to discuss this issue in person, but as you will recall we had an exchange of correspondence in May and June of last year about the treatment in Hansard of corrections to inadvertent errors to Ministerial written (and possibly oral) answers. Your Committee had been looking at aspects of this and took the view with which I broadly agreed that "errors in the Official Report . . . should be corrected in the Official Report". It is generally undesirable for a correction to be made by a letter to the Member concerned which can only be found in the Library. A number of other colleagues on both sides of the House have made representations about how corrections subsequently made by Ministers could be made more easily identifiable in the Official Report.

I have tried to ensure that when colleagues do correct the record that they do so quickly and by means of either a Written Ministerial Statement or—where the rules of the House permit—a pursuant answer.

However, when a correction is given there is no clear way of identifying and linking the original response to the correction given. Members should not have to work their way through Hansard before finding the correction. I believe we should change the system to make it more transparent—for Government in acknowledging that it got it wrong but more importantly for the Member who tabled the question. I am keen to avoid any accusation that the Government has been less than forthcoming with the facts.

One proposal which I would like your Committee to look at is the establishment of a separate corrections page in Hansard. It would be for consideration whether corrections placed there should be limited to the kinds of corrections currently capable of being contained within a pursuant answer, or should—as I suspect might be more helpful to the House—include any corrections currently outside those rules but delivered by letter. Importantly, I would suggest that in the electronic version of Hansard (and possibly in the bound volume if that is feasible) the original answer as printed would then have a link to the correction.

My office has been discussing such a proposal informally with the Editor of Hansard who is not averse to such a change, and with the Table Office (who operate the system of "pursuant answers" on behalf of the Speaker). I am in no doubt that it would be more appropriate if they were to receive the endorsement of

your Committee. I think, for example, that we would all wish to avoid inadvertently moving to a system which, by giving greater prominence to the correction of inadvertent errors, encourages a greater demand for “corrections” where the issue of whether any such error has been made is in reality a political issue. Such a state of affairs would of course risk placing the Speaker under unwanted pressures.

I would be grateful if you could give this proposal fair wind and consider any detailed issues on which the Departments of the House would need closer guidance.

January 2007

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**Paper from the Editor of the Official Report and the Principal Clerk, Table Office, House of Commons  
(P24)**

**THE INCLUSION OF CORRECTIONS IN THE OFFICIAL REPORT**

**BACKGROUND**

1. The Leader of the House wrote to the Chairman of the Procedure Committee on 26 January outlining a proposal to establish a separate section of the Official Report to publish corrections by ministers to written answers and statements, and possibly oral answers. The Committee asked the Clerk of the House and the Editor to set out how such a proposal might operate in both practical and procedural terms.

**CURRENT PRACTICE**

2. There are five ways in which written corrections can be made to written answers:
- (a) The Department sends a letter to the Editor pointing out an error (normally, but not exclusively, an error made by the Official Report) and requesting a correction for the Bound Volume. As long as the correction sought does not alter the meaning of the answer originally printed, the Official Report makes that correction in the Bound Volume, which is printed some months later. The version on the website is changed when the bound volume is printed. The PIMS (Library) record is also amended to show the correct information. It is clear from the Library that some Departments also write to the Members concerned to let them know that a correction has been sought.
  - (b) The Department asks the Table Office for endorsement of a “pursuant” answer to a previously tabled and answered question. The Table Office considers whether the pursuant answer conforms with the House’s policy—that it is a correction of relatively inconsequential matters of fact (figures and dates) and not a reversal of sense, or an attempt to offer new information or continue debate. The Official Report prints the original question and the new answer in the Daily Part, prefixed by the phrase “pursuant to the answer of [date]”. It is not always obvious that a pursuant answer is a “correction”. No link is made between the original question and answer and the pursuant in the Bound Volume or on the website. The PIMS record contains both the updated information and the original question and answer, with a link between the two. The Table Office advises Departments to write to Members if they intend to make a pursuant answer.
  - (c) The Minister can “inspire” a Question seeking clarification of an answer previously given or statement previously made.
  - (d) The Minister makes a written ministerial statement to correct a previous written answer or statement—the most recent example of this, from the Leader of the House, can be seen at col 62WS on 22 February. That statement is printed in the Daily Part. No link is made between the original answer or statement and the correcting statement either in the Bound Volume or on the website. The PIMS record contains the written ministerial statement.
  - (e) The Minister writes directly to the Member who asked the original question pointing out that an error was made and giving the correct information. A copy of the letter is sent to the Deposited Papers Clerk in the Library. It is classified within the main deposited papers series, and a record is added on PIMS, although no electronic copy is available and the details of the correction are not given in the record. The record for the original question is amended to add a link to the deposited paper. There is no record of this correction in the Official Report.
3. Making a correction to a ministerial answer given orally in the House, at Question Time, or following a statement or Urgent Question, or a ministerial remark in the course of debate, cannot be done by a written pursuant answer. It can be done by an inspired question, by a written ministerial statement or by a letter to the Member concerned, with a copy placed in the Library.

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**ISSUES FOR THE COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER***Scope*

4. The prospect of a corrections section in Hansard offers the opportunity for clarity as to the scope of material open for such correction. It is suggested that the proposed new section include only **ministerial** answers and statements, and answers made in an official capacity by those non-ministerial Members who answer on behalf of various statutory bodies—for example, the Church Commissioners and the House of Commons Commission; and that it should cover written and oral answers, including those given in response to statements and urgent questions, written ministerial statements, and anything said by a Minister in that capacity in the Chamber or Westminster Hall.

*The Committee is invited to agree that corrections can be made in the proposed new Corrections section to any Ministerial answers or statements made in their capacity as Ministers in the House or Westminster Hall.*

*Publication*

5. A corrections section in the Daily Part would have a distinctive suffix for reference purposes—for example, *Official Report, 1 April 2007, c 123C*. The creation of a corrections section would require some weeks to develop the software for both the production of the Daily Part and processing through the Library's PIMS indexing system, and some continuing additional staff time to manage. Hyperlinks would be inserted between the original text where it originally appeared and the corrections section: TSO, which hosts Hansard output on the internet, makes a small charge per item for this service. There will also be additional printing costs although, if the volume of corrections is maintained at its present level, those are likely to be small.

*Does the Committee agree to holding back publication of corrections to a specific daily part—for example, Monday—so that corrections can be seen on a predictable day?*

*Content*

6. Each correction could reproduce the texts of the original question and answer, or the original passage from debate, followed by the text of a correcting letter. It would be essential to establish a reasonably common format and content for such letters, to be inserted into guidance given to Departments and to be enforced by the House authorities. This might require corrections to be made on explicit ministerial authority and not by officials (three of the 30 correcting letters received by the Library in 2006 were from officials, not Ministers). Such guidance might also cover the extent to which explanations of the correction, or other information not in the original answer, should be included. But ultimately it would be up to Ministers to decide on the content of corrections, as is the case with written ministerial statements.

*Has the Committee a view on what should and should not be included in the text of a correction?*

7. If the Committee wished to continue the option of issuing pursuant answers, it would be possible to provide a link between the original question and answer and the pursuant answer on the website, so long as departments included the unique identifying number of the original question with the pursuant answer. But if a separate corrections section is agreed, it is assumed that this would become the principal if not the only avenue for corrections.

*Does the Committee agree that the written Correction section should become the principal means of correction, and in particular that pursuants would no longer be admitted?*

*March 2007*

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