

## Briefing from Sands for the Baby Deaths Debate Westminster Hall - 4 September 2024, 9:30am

### Introduction

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13 babies die before, during or shortly after birth every day in the UK with national reports suggesting that 1 in 5 stillbirths and neonatal deaths could be prevented with better care if guidelines were consistently followed.<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, the then Government announced an ambition to halve the rates of stillbirths and neonatal deaths, by 2025 relative to 2010 levels. Despite initial success in reducing deaths, this target is not on track to be met. Whilst it is encouraging that the new Government set out commitments to an explicit target to close the Black and Asian maternal mortality gap in their election manifesto this must include babies too.

Below we have set out key areas the Government must address to help prevent babies dying and eliminate inequalities in loss.

### Renew and extend the national maternity safety ambitions

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There are current ambitions in England to halve the rates of stillbirth, neonatal and maternal deaths and brain injuries by 2025 (relative to 2010 levels) and an ambition to reduce preterm births from 8% to 6% by 2025.

Whilst these ambitions have challenged the notion that baby loss is inevitable, progress has stalled, and we are not on track to reach these ambitions. The Sands and Tommy's Joint Policy Unit calculated that over 800 babies' lives may have been saved with better care in 2022-23.<sup>2</sup> It is essential that the maternity safety ambitions are renewed beyond 2025 and extended to include targets on reducing inequality.

### Questions to Raise:

- **What are the Government's plans to renew the national maternity safety ambitions beyond 2025?**
- **Whilst it is encouraging that the Government has set out a commitment to reducing inequalities in maternal deaths, will the Government introduce a national ambition to reduce these inequalities in baby deaths?**
- **What is the Government's plan for ensuring the NHS is equipped with the right resources and support to reduce the number of babies dying each year?**

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<sup>1</sup> [PMRT Report 2022 - Main Report FINAL PUBLISHED.pdf \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Saving Babies' Lives 2024: A report on progress \(sands.org.uk\)](#)

## Eliminate inequalities in pregnancy and baby loss

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No baby should have an increased risk of dying because of their race or ethnicity or where they were born. However, in the UK stark and persistent inequalities in baby loss remain.

Black babies are over twice as likely to be stillborn as white babies. Black and Asian babies are also over 50% more likely to die shortly after birth compared with white babies.<sup>3</sup>

The Sands *End Inequality in Baby Loss* campaign is calling for action across the Government, NHS and professional bodies to make care safer, and more equitable, to save Black and Asian babies' lives.<sup>4</sup> To underpin this, as well as renewing national ambitions to reduce baby deaths, the Government must also extend them to include reducing inequalities.

In December 2023, alongside MBRRACE-UK's<sup>5</sup> confidential enquiries into the deaths of Black and Asian babies, Sands published the Listening Project Report which heard the lived experiences of Black and Asian bereaved parents.<sup>6</sup>

Half of the parents who took part believed that they had received worse care or been treated differently by healthcare staff because of their ethnicity.<sup>7</sup> Asian parents discussed being dismissed as overly anxious or prone to exaggerating health concerns. Several Black parents described how racist stereotyping assuming them to be 'feisty' or 'dramatic' had prevented professionals from recognising when they were at their most vulnerable.

***"I felt so let down because I knew I was in labour but I was told that I was being dramatic."*** - mother to twins born at 26 weeks who died neonatally.

The report provided the following practical recommendations for the Government:

- Set out long-term, funded plans aimed at eliminating inequalities in pregnancy loss and baby deaths.
- Ensure that maternity services have the staff capacity, skills and resources required to assess and care for women and birthing people effectively, so that the risk factors affecting each individual are recognised and their impact reduced.
- Initiating and funding a research programme to inform the development of effective interventions to address health inequalities and save babies' lives.
- Take steps to ensure that all maternity safety improvements schemes include a focus on tackling inequalities, with action, progress and impact monitored.

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<sup>3</sup> State of the nation report | MBRRACE-UK ([le.ac.uk](https://www.mbrpace-uk.org/))

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sands.org.uk/end-inequalities-in-baby-loss>

<sup>5</sup> Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries across the UK - <https://www.npeu.ox.ac.uk/mbrpace-uk>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.sands.org.uk/get-involved/get-involved-research/sands-listening-project-learning-experiences-black-and-asian>

<sup>7</sup> [Sands Listening Project Report Publication of Findings 2023.pdf](#)

The MBRRACE-UK confidential enquiry identified cases where women who should have been screened for gestational diabetes were not offered the test, and whilst all Black and Asian women should have been eligible for higher dose Vitamin D, not all were offered this in line with national standards.<sup>8</sup>

High profile reviews of maternity services, such the 2022 Ockenden Review have consistently identified that guidelines must be followed and implemented by NHS Trusts, especially the NHS Saving Babies' Lives Care Bundle.<sup>9</sup>

We know a better system is possible. In the Listening Project, we also heard examples from Black and Asian parents of positive, joined-up, empathetic maternity and neonatal care. This must become the standard.

### Questions to Raise:

- **The baby loss charity Sands has calculated that if, between 2017 and 2021, stillbirth & neonatal death rates were the same for Black and Asian babies as white babies, 1,704 babies would have survived. Will the new Government consider designing a long-term, funded plan to eliminate inequalities in baby loss and save more babies' lives?**
- **In the UK, there are persistent inequalities in baby loss by ethnicity. The latest data from MBRRACE-UK reveals that, in 2022, Black babies were over twice as likely to be compared with white babies – and Asian babies were over 50% more likely to be stillborn. What plans does the new Government have to tackle this inequality in baby deaths?**
- **Following the publication of MBRRACE- UK's Confidential Enquiries into Black and Asian Baby deaths in December 2023, what discussions has the Government had with NHS England to ensure all eligible pregnant women are offered tests or medication as recommended by NHS guidelines?**

### Deliver a fully funded workforce

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Staffing issues in maternity and neonatal services are acute. Nearly a third of Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) shifts are not being sufficiently staffed.<sup>10</sup> In addition to 63% of midwives feeling unwell in the last 12 months due to stress.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Perinatal Confidential Enquiry | MBRRACE-UK and Perinatal Confidential Enquiry | MBRRACE-UK

<sup>9</sup>

Findings, conclusions and essential actions from the independent review of maternity services at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust - final Ockenden report (sands.org.uk), NHS England » Saving babies' lives version three: a care bundle for reducing perinatal mortality, NHS England » Saving Babies' Lives Version Two: A care bundle for reducing perinatal mortality

<sup>10</sup> Sands Tommys JPU Priorities for the next government 2024.pdf

<sup>11</sup> Sands Tommys JPU Priorities for the next government 2024.pdf

The APPGs on Maternity and Baby Loss's 2022 report in to staffing in maternity services highlighted a widespread and growing sense of fear of mistakes and incidents, or other failures due to the chronic levels of understaffing among NHS staff.<sup>12</sup>

It is essential that investment in retention and adequate long-term funding are addressed in NHS England's recently published Long Term Workforce Plan to ensure the delivery of safe care during pregnancy and the neonatal period.

#### Questions to Raise:

- **What steps will the Government take to address staffing issues in maternity and neonatal services and ensure that investment in retention and adequate long-term funding are prioritised?**
- **What is the Government's plan to support the recruitment of midwives?**

#### Prioritise safe care

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Lessons are still not being learnt when babies die and too often, nationally agreed standards of care are not being followed. This is contributing to avoidable deaths. Between 2022-23, at least 1 in 5 stillbirths and neonatal deaths may have been prevented with better care. Ultimately, over 800 babies' lives could have been saved.<sup>13</sup>

High profile reviews of maternity services, such as the 2022 Ockenden Review have consistently identified that guidelines must be followed and implemented by NHS Trusts, especially the NHS Saving Babies' Lives Care Bundle V2.<sup>14</sup>

In 2022-23, nearly half of maternity services were rated as 'inadequate' or 'requires in improvement' by the CQC.<sup>15</sup> The Government must prioritise a comprehensive national approach which puts in place the key elements of a safe system.

#### Questions to Raise:

- **Between 2022-23, half of England's maternity services were rated as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' by the Care Quality Commission, what action will the Government take to put in place to ensure a safe maternity care system, where national guidelines are followed consistently?**
- **What steps will the Government take to ensure that progress is continually monitored with regards to improving safety within maternity services?**

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<sup>12</sup> [Staffing shortages - APPG report, Oct 22 \(final\).pdf \(sands.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Sands Tommys JPU Priorities for the next government 2024.pdf](#)

<sup>14</sup>

[Findings, conclusions and essential actions from the independent review of maternity services at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust - final Ockenden report \(sands.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>15</sup> [State of Care 2022/23 - Care Quality Commission \(cqc.org.uk\)](#)

## Provide adequate support following loss

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Not all bereaved parents can access the compassionate care they need. This can hugely impact their wellbeing in the short term and for the rest of their lives. Healthcare professionals across the UK do not have sufficient access to bereavement care training. This means they are not adequately supported to gain the skills and confidence they need to provide excellent care for families when a baby dies, or to look after their own wellbeing.

Sands monitors the implementation of the National Bereavement Care Pathway (NBCP). The NBCP provides nine standards of care, across five different experiences of pregnancy and baby loss, to ensure equity of bereavement care no matter where a parent lives in the UK.<sup>16</sup>

In England, all 128 NHS Trusts have now signed up to the NBCP standards. However, the Government must make the pathway mandatory and provide funding to help Trusts implement the standards. It is essential that the standards set out in the NBCP are enforced as mandatory for all NHS Trusts and they are provided with the resource necessary to implement them.

### Question to Raise:

- **Will the Government take steps to ensure that the National Bereavement Care Pathway is enforced as mandatory for all NHS Trusts?**
- **Will the Government allocate funding to support the implementation of the National Bereavement Care Pathway for all NHS Trusts to ensure that all bereaved parents can access the compassionate care and support they need when their baby has died?**

## About Sands

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At Sands, we work to save babies' lives and ensure that when a baby does die anyone affected gets the care and support they need. We provide bereavement and peer support to grieving families. We support and promote research to better understand the causes of baby deaths and save babies' lives. We raise awareness of baby loss and work with governments, the NHS and healthcare professionals to make saving babies' lives and improving bereavement care a priority.

**Contact:** Public Affairs and Campaigns Team at Sands, [campaigns@sands.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@sands.org.uk)

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<sup>16</sup> [Home - National Bereavement Care Pathway \(nbcpathway.org.uk\)](http://Home - National Bereavement Care Pathway (nbcpathway.org.uk))