

Sands - baby loss charity briefing for oral question on perinatal mental health services in England in the financial year 2024-25

House of Lords, 25th June 2025

Summary

Every day in the UK, 13 babies die shortly before, during or soon after birth. And there's still much uncertainty around the numbers and rates of pregnancy loss, with evidence suggesting at least 1 in 6 pregnancies end in miscarriage. This heartbreak leaves a deep and lasting impact on the lives of parents and families.

The Baby Loss Awareness Week Alliance's 2019 [Out of Sight, Out of Mind report](#), found, "the negative impact individuals experience if they do not get the right support is vast. It affects all aspects of people's lives including future pregnancies, personal relationships, physical health and employment. The repercussions are felt across wider society, costing the NHS more in the long run." [Recent data](#) released by the Office for National Statistics shows that pregnancy and baby loss can have a significant impact on employment and earnings, with earnings after a stillbirth lower for at least five years, with an average total loss of £13,581 over this period.

It is essential that all bereaved families can access the psychological support they need, free or charge at a time and place which is right for them.

Maternal mental health services

[The NHS Long Term Plan](#) established new maternal mental health services to support women and birthing people with moderate to severe mental health needs arising from their maternity experience. With pilot sites in 2020/21 and 2021/22, the NHS Long Term Plan committed to full implementation by 2023/24. However, services have only launched this year in some areas.

This was important in recognising that bereaved parents' needs were not being met by specialist perinatal mental health services. Which usually only supported women or birthing people during their pregnancy and those with a live baby postnatally. This left bereaved parents to generic mental health services with staff who were not trained to support grief or postnatal mental health.

Whilst we are pleased that all ICBs in England should now be offering a maternal mental health service, we are aware of differing criteria and postcode lotteries in access. This includes differences in the length of time bereaved parents can be referred to the service. We are aware of services who accept referrals up to one year, two years, three years and five years after an experience of loss. We are pleased that some services offer access indefinitely and we would like to see this adopted by all services.

Questions to raise:

- What assessment has the government made of the rollout of maternal mental health services?
- What steps will the government be taking to ensure that access to maternal mental health services is not a postcode lottery?
- How is the government monitoring the delivery of maternal mental health services by ICBs across England, and will they commit to a national specification on referral and eligibility to ensure access is not a postcode lottery?

Barriers to access to psychological support for bereaved fathers and partners

Fathers and partners face additional barriers to accessing specialist psychological support.

Whilst maternal mental health services should offer an [evidence-based assessment and signposting for bereaved fathers and partners](#), the [Maternal Mental Health Alliance](#) found that whilst 71% of services signposted to other sources of support, only 29% were providing a basic assessment of needs. Only 17% provided the ability to join some sessions with the woman/birthing person.

Additionally, grief is very individual, and often a couple may not feel or need the same things at the same time. This may lead to their grief emerging weeks, or even months, after their baby's death. Whilst not every bereaved parent will need psychological support, research has found that 13% of partners who have

experienced a stillbirth or neonatal death report four or more negative psychological symptoms nine months postpartum.¹

It is essential that fathers and partners can access assessment and referral for psychological support from specialist services, at a time that is right for them. By linking assessment and signposting to a mother or birthing persons referral this currently does not recognise that grief and mental health needs are individual.

Questions to raise:

- Will the Minister explain what actions the government is taking to ensure that all bereaved parents, including fathers, non-birthing mothers and partners, can access specialist psychological support, free of charge, at a time and place which is right for them?
- Currently not all bereaved fathers and partners are able to access an evidence-based assessment through maternal mental health services, despite this clearly being set out in the 2019 NHS Long Term Plan. Will the Minister commit to exploring how services can be extended to ensure they have the capacity to offer an assessment to bereaved fathers and partners?
- The 2019 NHS Long Term Plan set out a plan to ensure that all fathers and partners of women and birthing people accessing maternal mental health or specialist perinatal mental health services could access an assessment. However, this links access for fathers and partners to the needs of a mother or birthing person and means bereaved fathers cannot access an assessment themselves if their partner is not referred to the service. Will the Minister commit to exploring how bereaved fathers can access an assessment with specialist psychological support services, regardless of whether the mother or birthing person needs support themselves?

Assessment and referral to psychological support

Usually, the first opportunity for a healthcare professional to assess and refer bereaved parents for psychological support, if needed, will be in the hospital.

¹ Redshaw, M · Rowe, R · Henderson, J, *Listening to parents: after stillbirth or the death of their baby after birth*. Policy Research Unit in Maternal Health and Care, National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit, Oxford, 2014

Healthcare professionals providing care to recently bereaved parents should be delivering this in line with the [National Bereavement Care Pathway](#) (NBCP) [standards](#).

Sands is pleased to lead on the NBCP, which seeks to improve the quality and consistency of bereavement care received by parents from the NHS after pregnancy or baby loss. All hospitals delivering maternity services have agreed to implement the standards.

The fourth standard states that, “All bereaved parents and families are informed about and, where needed, referred for emotional support and for specialist psychological support.”

Any service delivering care in line with the NBCP must make sure that they inform bereaved parents about the psychological support available in their local area, and where needed, make a referral.

However, in England the standards are not currently mandatory meaning that there are inconsistencies the way these are delivered and there is not currently any monitoring or oversight. To ensure that all bereaved parents receive care in line with the standards, including being informed about and, where needed, referred for psychological support we would like to see the standards mandated with national oversight and monitoring of compliance.

Questions to raise:

- Will the government mandate the standards within the National Bereavement Care Pathway to ensure that all hospitals delivering maternity services to bereaved parents inform them about and, where needed, refer for specialist psychological support?

About Sands

Sands is the charity speaking up about pregnancy and baby loss, saving babies' lives and supporting bereaved families. We provide trauma informed bereavement support as well as providing a safe, understanding and caring community for anyone who needs us. 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. We are the voice of bereaved parents at a national level.

Please contact campaigns@sands.org.uk if you have any questions.