

Guidance for Sands Groups and supporters: Involving politicians in our work



Sands Groups and supporters are a crucial part of the Sands story, helping to support bereaved families, making change happen and working to reduce the number of babies dying. Thank you for your interest in involving local politicians in our work.

This guidance gives a brief overview of the best ways for Sands supporters to engage local politicians, and lays out the key legal and other restrictions on what we can do. Working with local politicians can be a useful way of drawing attention to issues around stillbirth and neonatal death. Equally, building up a relationship with local elected officials can help create support for local or national initiatives to prevent baby loss or improve bereavement support.

For more information, and to let us know when you're in touch with your local politicians, contact the Sands team on caroline.stickland@sands.org.uk

1. Members of Parliament (MPs)

It can be useful to engage with your local constituency MP. They will often hold surgeries for people who live in their constituency, so it's a good opportunity for members of your Group to speak with them.

MPs do not have formal power over local service delivery. However, as your local representative, they can make representations to local health, social care or council services on behalf of their constituents to raise issues or propose solutions.

MPs also have a key role as your local representative in Parliament. They raise issues in the Westminster Parliament brought to them by their constituents, where national government may have a role to play in improving support or services. For example, if you felt that the bereavement care offered at your local hospital was inadequate (and had raised this concern with the hospital to no effect), you could consider speaking to your local MP, who might write on your behalf to the hospital. Equally, if you felt that the provision of bereavement care at your hospital was indicative of a larger trend in poor bereavement support offered across the country, then your MP might raise this issue in parliament and with national Government.

You can find your local MP by going to the UK parliament website and putting in your postcode here: <https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/>

You can also search for details about local MPs at TheyWorkForYou (<https://www.theyworkforyou.com/>), or by looking at their own websites or social media accounts.

2. Members of devolved legislatures

If you live in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, you are also represented by politicians at each country's devolved legislatures.

- MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament) are elected to the Scottish Parliament
- AMs (Assembly Members) are elected to the Welsh Assembly
- MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) are elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly

Health policy is devolved to these legislatures. This means, for example, only the Scottish Parliament can make laws governing the NHS in Scotland; the Westminster Parliament has no power over health services in Scotland. So if you wanted to change national health policy in Scotland, it's best to get in touch with your local MSP rather than your local MP.

MSPs, AMs and MLAs have similar roles to MPs in highlighting local issues, voting on national legislations and advocating for changes in national policy, so it can be useful to engage them on specific issues.

You can find your local devolved representative and learn more about the devolved legislatures below. Remember that you will have more than one local parliamentarian so do get in touch with all those who represent your area.

Scotland: <http://www.parliament.scot/mspfinder/index.html>

Wales: <http://www.assembly.wales/en/memhome/Pages/memhome.aspx>

Northern Ireland: <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/mlas/search.aspx>

3. Local councillors

Local councillors will have interests in, and some control over many local decisions. While responsibilities of councils vary in the different UK countries and depend on the type of council, councillors will often have influence over bereavement support outside of hospital and council funding for local charities. In different countries of the UK, some councillors may also have some direct input on health services planning, for example, if they are a member of a Health and Wellbeing Board in England. As such, councillors can have a powerful voice in both raising awareness of issues and taking action to solve problems locally.

The most powerful councillors will be those on the local Cabinet (i.e. in the party which holds the balance of power locally), particularly the Leader of the Council. More information about how councils work is available at the links below:

England: <https://www.gov.uk/understand-how-your-council-works>

Wales: <http://gov.wales/topics/localgovernment/unitary-authorities/?lang=en>

Scotland: <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Government/local-government>

Northern Ireland: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/local-councils>

You can find your local councillor here: <https://www.gov.uk/find-your-local-councillors>

4. What we can and can't do

As a Sands supporter or a member of a Sands Group, any work you do with the group or on behalf of Sands would be treated as the work of Sands as a charity. There are a number of laws (as well as charity guidance) that set out what activity we can or can't undertake when it comes to working with politicians.

The two key rules are:

- **Don't be partisan.** In other words, we must not endorse or oppose any party, politician or candidate. That includes Sands or Sands Groups giving funding to a political party, politician or candidate. That said, we can give our support to specific policies advocated by political parties if it would help our charitable purposes, but we must be clear that we are not endorsing a particular party or politician.

To take an example, we might publicly welcome a statement from the government mandating that hospitals should provide bereavement suites, but only because we support the provision of bereavement suites as a policy, not because we support the government/ruling party of the day. Fundamentally, as a charity we want, and advocate for, **all parties** to push for policies that reduce baby deaths and support bereaved parents.

- **Stick to our charitable purposes.** We must keep focused on what Sands is here to do, rather than campaigning on unrelated issues. We might have personal feelings about climate change, stray cats or public transport fares. But it's very unlikely those would be legitimate topics for Sands or Sands Groups to campaign about.

As a reminder, Sands' charitable purposes (otherwise known as 'objects of the charity') are:

1. *to promote the emotional, psychological and physical well-being of parents, their families and friends, when a baby dies in utero, at birth or soon after birth, by:*
 - 1.1 *the provision of support and information to those so bereaved and their carers; and*
 - 1.2 *by working collaboratively with health and social care professionals to improve and enhance professional practice with bereaved parents; and*
2. *to promote research and the implementation of best practice that will help identify the causes and reduce the incidence of the death of a baby in utero, at birth or soon after birth, and to publish the results of such research.*

The majority of our work with politicians would fall under 2., by promoting research and best practice (i.e. policy).

Of course, any member of a Sands Group, a Sands volunteer or Sands staff member has the right to their own opinion and voice. You can contact a politician about any

issue that you have a view on, but that must be in your own personal capacity. If you are representing a Sands Group (and by extension Sands), you'll need to follow the two rules above.

More information on campaigning legal dos and don'ts are here:

- England and Wales: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/speaking-out-guidance-on-campaigning-and-political-activity-by-charities-cc9>
- Scotland: https://www.oscr.org.uk/media/2899/v14_faqs-charities-and-campaigning-on-political-issues.pdf
- Northern Ireland: <http://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk/charity-essentials/charities-and-politics/>

Finally, the UK government's Lobbying Act also puts additional restrictions upon charities' activities during a local or national election period. If an election is called, Sands may consider registering with the Electoral Commission if we plan on spending more than £20,000 in England or £10,000 in Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales (including staffing costs) on certain campaigning activities that are regulated. That said, Sands, and most other charities would be unlikely to need to register if we campaign in a non-partisan way, focusing on our charitable objectives and policies to achieve them.

5. Practical tips

Given the above, here are some useful tips on how best to engage with politicians. Many are obvious, some are less so, but we hope this helps with many fruitful conversations!

- **Keep us in the loop:** We're often engaging with MPs and other politicians in our work, so it's really useful to keep up to date. That also helps us share information and coordinate our activity, so all our local and national work can be joined up. We will keep you informed about the work we're doing too. We can also help with the next point...
- **Do your research:** before you meet a politician, look into what their interests are, any public statements or speeches they have made that relate to the topic, so that you can have a good sense what they're interested in. The better informed you are, the better chance you have building a productive relationship.
- **Be positive, offering partnership first:** while there are many negative stereotypes of politicians, the vast majority got into politics to make people's lives and the country better. As such, while it's important to identify where problems are and when politicians need to do more, it's just as important to understand that most politicians are looking to help. So, when engaging with politicians, it's usually to look at ways it might be possible to work together first, rather than coming in with a pessimistic approach. Politicians are people too, and are more likely to engage with people or groups who are open about their intentions and concerns, and willing to work together.

- **Remember you're representing Sands, not just yourself:** when you're speaking on behalf of your local Sands Group, you are representing Sands the charity. As a result, you need to remember that what you say and do reflects on the charity as a whole, and all other Sands Groups and supporters.
- **Keep to the issue:** Sands is the stillbirth and neonatal deaths charity, so we're only interested in topics relating to those issues. You can share your personal experiences and understanding of the issues; in fact, it will often be helpful to share those experiences to show politicians the reality of stillbirth or neonatal death. We just need to stay away from unrelated policy areas when speaking on behalf of Sands. For example, while we may all have personal opinions about nuclear power, donkey sanctuaries, or income tax rates, Sands has no public position on those topics!
- **Keep discussions impersonal:** Make sure any engagement with politicians focuses on the issues, not individuals. As a charity, we don't support or oppose any politicians. For instance, Jeremy Hunt MP is the current Secretary of State for Health for England, with ultimate responsibility for the NHS in England. As a charity, we have **no** opinion on Jeremy Hunt MP or other Ministers in any of the UK nations, but may have a charity view on the policies those Ministers implement. Our views are, and must always be, purely on what the Government's policies on health may or may not do to reduce baby deaths and support bereaved parents.
- **Be even-handed:** We need to avoid any impression of favoritism, by aiming to include a range of political parties in any relevant public policy work. When Sands is organising events in Westminster for example, we take care to invite members of all parties to attend. Equally, if you were to organise a local event in a hospital, you could invite all local MPs whose constituencies are served by that hospital.

Often, it will help to engage politicians from different parties. If you're pushing for the local council to make changes on a specific service, it's worth making your case to both the party/parties in charge, as well as those in opposition, not least as that should encourage more people to support your position.

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