

**Sands position on issuing both birth certificates and death certificates for stillborn babies (babies born dead after 24 completed weeks of pregnancy).**

The death of a baby before birth is no less a bereavement than any other death.

Sadly there is a lack of public recognition of the impact of losing a baby at or before birth. The death of a stillborn baby is too often underestimated and parents can be left isolated, feeling that their loss is unacknowledged.

Registration is required by law for all stillbirths (that is, babies born after 24 completed weeks of pregnancy showing no signs of life), and all live births and all deaths. Live births, and the deaths of babies born alive, are registered in the same way as any other death. Stillbirths are registered separately: the death is registered in a Register of Stillbirths, and a Stillbirth Certificate is issued.

Sands understands that some parents would like to see a change in the law, so that the parents of all stillborn babies would be given both a birth and a death certificate. There are parents too whose baby dies before they are born before 24 weeks or pregnancy who would like to be able to register that death as a stillbirth.

Currently Sands does not support such changes for the following reasons:

Although some bereaved parents feel strongly that they want both a birth and death certificate for their stillborn baby, other parents do not. Although some parents feel strongly they would like to register their baby as stillborn if it died before 24 weeks, others would not. As a charity supporting anyone affected by the death of a baby, we are aware that there is a very broad range of feelings amongst bereaved parents on these issues. Sands' view is that the current situation, while not satisfying all parents, is acceptable to the majority, and therefore should remain as it is.

Sands is also concerned that any changes to the way in which stillborn babies are registered may make it harder to monitor stillbirth trends and causes, and could hamper stillbirth prevention work.

17 babies are stillborn or die shortly after birth every single day in the UK, and the stillbirth rate in the UK has not changed in over a decade. A better understanding of the causes of stillbirth is urgently needed, so clear and reliable data is essential. Specific data from Stillbirth Certificates is important for monitoring stillbirth trends, and to focus on ways of preventing these deaths.

## **Sands position statement issuing stillbirth or birth and death certificates for babies born dead before 24 completed weeks of pregnancy**

In 1992, following clear consensus from the medical profession that the age at which a baby is considered viable should be changed from 28 to 24 weeks, Parliament supported a change to the stillbirth definition from “after 28 weeks” to “after 24 completed weeks”

Sands lobbied for several years to achieve the passing of the Stillbirth (Definition) Act 1992. This was a major breakthrough, and had huge significance for parents - a baby who is born dead at or after 24 completed weeks of pregnancy is now recognised in law as an individual: the baby's death must be registered in person by one or both parents at a register office, and a Stillbirth Certificate issued to the parents. In England and Wales this has to be done within 6 weeks of the baby's birth. In Scotland it must be done within 3 weeks.

However, medical opinion does not currently support reducing the age of viability below 24 weeks. At present evidence to justify this change is not strong enough and the Government has made it clear that it has no plans to amend the stillbirth definition.

Sands understands that some parents would like to see a change in the law, so that the parents of all babies who die at any gestation be given a stillbirth certificate or a birth and a death certificate, which would be registered at a register office. However, Sands does not support this change for the following reasons:

As a charity supporting anyone affected by the death of a baby, we are aware that there are a very broad range of feelings amongst bereaved parents on this issue. Although some bereaved parents whose babies die before 24 weeks feel strongly that they want a stillbirth certificate, or a birth and death certificate for their baby, other parents do not and do not want to have to register their baby's birth at a register office.

We fully understand that some parents whose baby was born dead before 24 weeks find it very distressing that they cannot register the birth. However, it is important to recognise that there are also very many parents who would be distressed if they had to register the birth in this way.

We acknowledge that wherever the line is drawn on gestational age for defining a stillbirth there will be those who fall just outside the definition. So there will always be some who find this an additional source of distress at a deeply painful time.

At Sands we know from the many thousands of parents we support that having mementoes of their baby are very important to them. When a life is so short there are few opportunities for creating memories, and the few mementoes of their baby that parents can keep can be of great value. Sands therefore encourages all hospitals to offer parents of all those babies who are born dead before 24 weeks the option of a Certificate of Birth. Sands has a template of a Certificate of Birth available to download on its website at [http://www.uk.sands.org/fileadmin/content/Improving\\_Care/Forms/Certificate\\_to\\_be\\_offered\\_to\\_parents\\_of\\_a\\_baby\\_who\\_was\\_born\\_dead\\_before\\_24\\_weeks\\_gestation\\_mother\\_only.pdf](http://www.uk.sands.org/fileadmin/content/Improving_Care/Forms/Certificate_to_be_offered_to_parents_of_a_baby_who_was_born_dead_before_24_weeks_gestation_mother_only.pdf)