

Alcohol-specific deaths in Highland

2024 Briefing Paper



1. Introduction

In September 2025 National Records of Scotland (NRS) published statistics on alcohol-specific deaths registered in Scotland during 2024.¹ Information is available for each local authority and health board on the overall trend, age at death, cause of death and deprivation. Information about the age at death and sex has been added to from NRS data available locally. Full details of the definitions and methods are available in the national report and NRS website.^{1 2} This summary paper summarises the main results of deaths for the Highland Alcohol and Alcohol Partnership (HADP) area and is based on Highland Council residents or persons of no fixed abode who died in Highland.

2. Key Points

- Nationally, the number of alcohol-specific deaths have generally risen since 2012, remaining stable in recent years with a decline to 1,185 deaths registered in Scotland in 2024, which is a decrease of 7% (92 deaths) compared with 2023. This decrease between years is not statistically significant.
- 62 alcohol-specific deaths were registered in Highland in 2024, an increase of 9 deaths (17%) on the 2023 figure of 53 deaths.
- The annual average number of deaths for the five-year period 2020-2024 is 60, an increase of 9 deaths on the 2010-2014 average of 51 deaths;
- Highland has an alcohol-specific death rate of 22.6 per 100,000 population, which is just above the national death rate of 21.9 per 100,000 population. This measure is for the five-year period 2020-2024 and takes into account the differences in size and age-structure of the population between areas;
- Nationally between 2020 and 2024, male deaths continued to account for around two thirds (67%) of alcohol-specific deaths compared with 74% of deaths in Highland.
- In Scotland, the age profile has become older over time, with the average age at death increasing to 59 years in recent years. The average age at death in Highland remains fairly consistent at 60 years.
- In 2024, people in the most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD 1) are more than 4.5 times as likely to die from an alcohol-specific death compared to people in the least deprived areas (SIMD 5). Although the gap between alcohol-specific mortality rates in the most and least deprived areas has narrowed over time, alcohol-specific deaths have consistently been more common in more deprived areas.

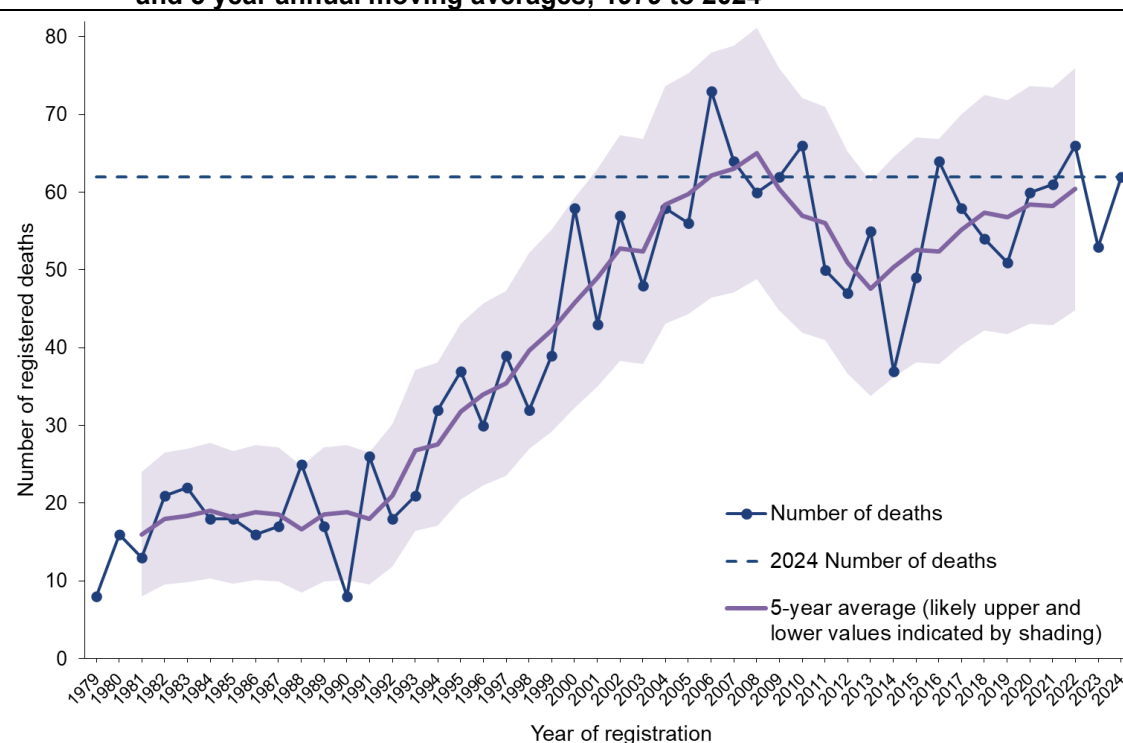
¹ National Records of Scotland *Alcohol-specific deaths in Scotland in 2024*; (2025)
<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/alcohol-specific-deaths-2024/> [Accessed September 2025]

² National Records of Scotland *Alcohol-specific deaths: Methodology*; (2025)
<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/media/yu5hrox0/alcohol-specific-deaths-methodology.pdf>

3. Highland Numbers

In comparison with 2023, there has been an increase in the number of alcohol-specific deaths in Highland in 2024 while the number of deaths for Scotland overall has decreased. There were 62 alcohol-specific deaths registered in 2024 compared to 53 in 2023, an increase of 9 deaths (17%). The numbers of alcohol-specific deaths each year are statistically relatively small in Highland and this means they are subject to year on year fluctuations, as shown in Figure 1. A more reliable indication of the longer-term trends is provided by using five-year annual averages, which 'smooth out' the effects of annual variation and are shown in Figure 1 with a thick solid line. Following a significantly increasing trend since the early nineties, the overall trend in alcohol-specific mortality in Highland was reducing from 2007 up to 2014. There has been an overall increasing trend in alcohol-specific mortality since 2014 although the increase has become more gradual in recent years.

Figure 1. Number of Alcohol-specific deaths for Highland Council area, annual number and 5 year annual moving averages; 1979 to 2024



Source: National Records of Scotland

4. Comparison with Scotland

In 2024, there were 1,185 alcohol-specific deaths registered in Scotland, a decrease of 7% (92 deaths) compared with 2023. This is the lowest number of alcohol-specific deaths registered in any year since 2019. After adjusting for age, there were 20.9 alcohol-specific deaths per 100,000 people in Scotland in 2024, a decrease compared with 2023 (22.5 per 100,000). This was not a statistically significant decrease in the death rate nationally. The latest decrease in the number of alcohol-specific deaths was not seen across all areas of Scotland. The number of alcohol-specific deaths decreased in twenty-one local authority areas, increased in nine areas and was unchanged in two areas.

Highland has an age standardised death rate of 22.6 per 100,000 population for 2020-2024 which is slightly above but not statistically significantly higher than the national average of 21.9 per 100,000 population (Table 1).

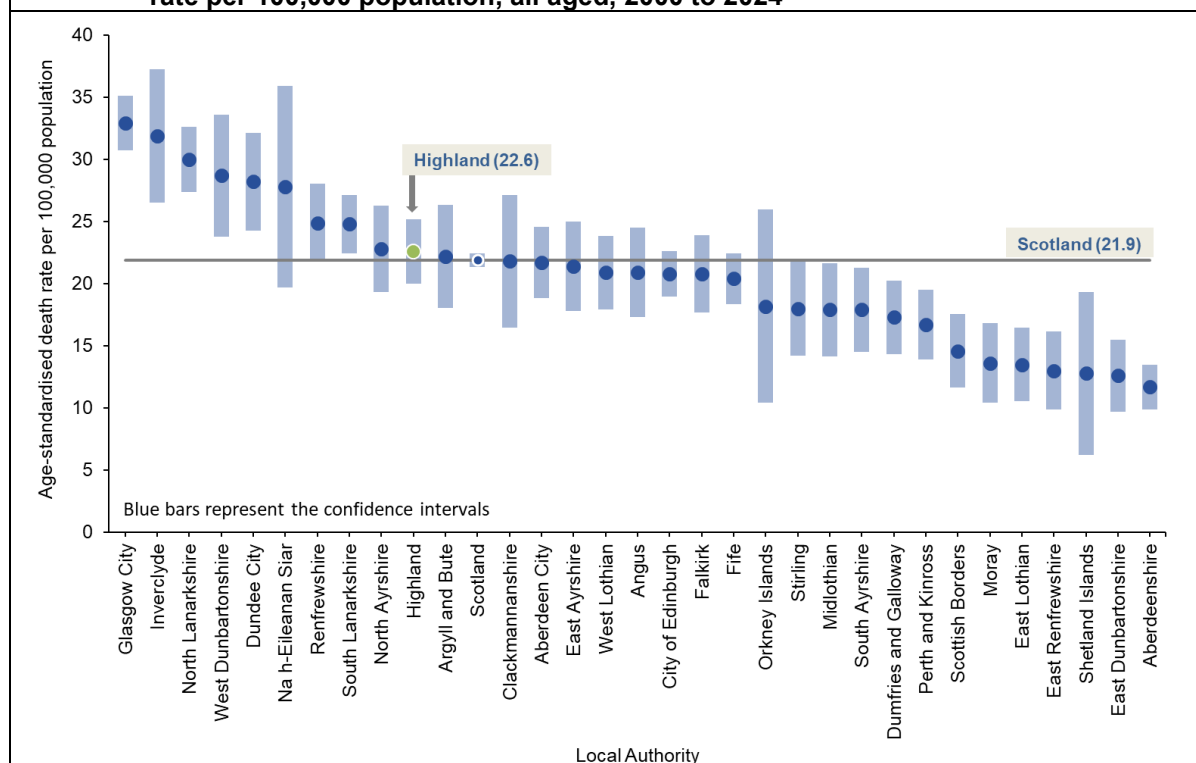
Table 1: Alcohol-specific deaths: total deaths, annual average number and age-standardised rate per 100,000 population, all aged

| | Total number of deaths in period | | Average annual number of deaths | | Age-standardised rate per 100,000 population | |
|----------|----------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|-----------|--|-----------|
| | 2010-2014 | 2020-2024 | 2010-2014 | 2020-2024 | 2010-2014 | 2020-2024 |
| Highland | 255 | 302 | 51 | 60 | 20.5 | 22.6 |
| Scotland | 5324 | 6173 | 1065 | 1235 | 20.3 | 21.9 |

Source: National Records of Scotland

Highland is one of eleven out of thirty-two local authority areas with rates above the Scotland rate (Figure 2). Five local authority areas have alcohol-specific death rates significantly higher than the Scotland rate: Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire and Dundee City.

Figure 2. Alcohol-specific deaths for Scotland and by local authority area, age-standardised rate per 100,000 population, all aged, 2000 to 2024



Source: National Records of Scotland

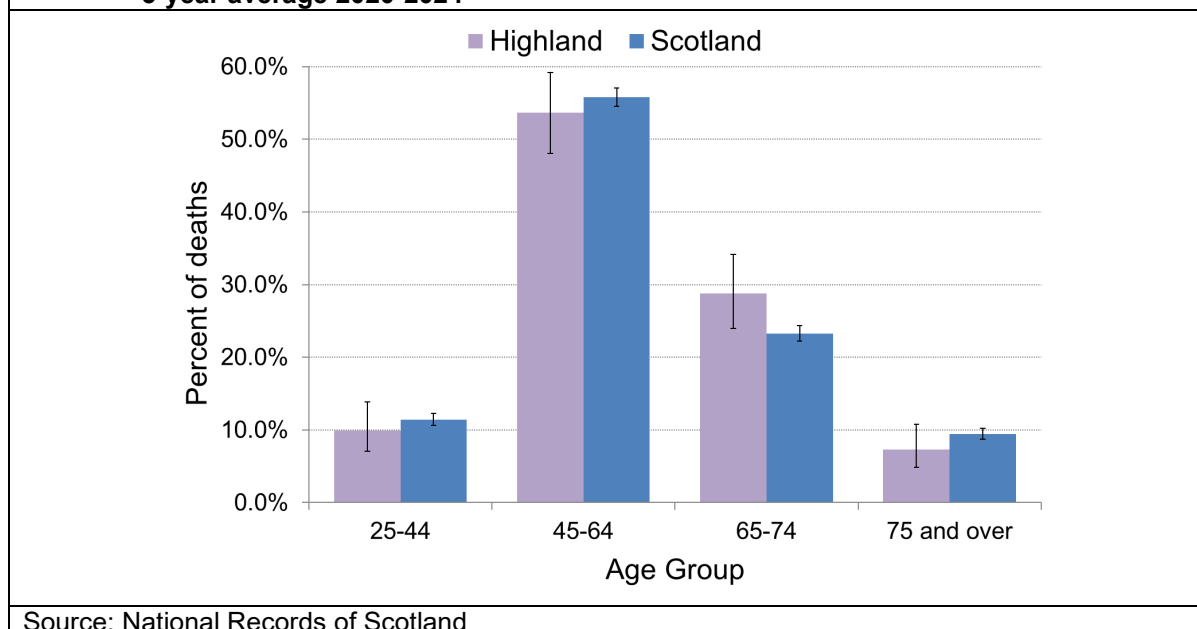
Nationally between 2020 and 2024, male deaths continued to account for around two thirds of alcohol-specific deaths (67%) compared with 74% of deaths in Highland. In Scotland, the age profile has become older over time, with the average age at death increasing to 59 years in recent years. Similarly, the average age at death in Highland is 60 years.

There is a greatly increased risk of alcohol-specific death for people living in the most deprived areas of Scotland who are more than 4.5 times as likely to die from an alcohol-specific death compared to people in the least deprived areas in 2024. For all causes of death, people in the most deprived areas are around twice as likely to die as those in the least deprived areas. The highest ratio nationally for alcohol-specific deaths was 8.7 times higher in 2002. However, although this ratio has decreased over time, alcohol-specific deaths have consistently been more common in more deprived areas.

5. Age at Death

Between 2020 and 2024 there were 302 alcohol-specific deaths in Highland; 30 deaths of people aged 25-44 years (9.9%), 162 deaths in the 45-64 age group (53.6%), 87 deaths in the 65-74 age group (28.8%) and 22 deaths of people aged 75 years and over (7.3%). Figure 3 shows that there is little variation in the age at death between Highland and the national profile.

Figure 3: Alcohol-specific deaths percentage by age group, Highland and Scotland; 5-year average 2020-2024



The age-specific rates of alcohol-specific deaths for Highland compared to Scotland are shown in Table 2 and Figure 4.

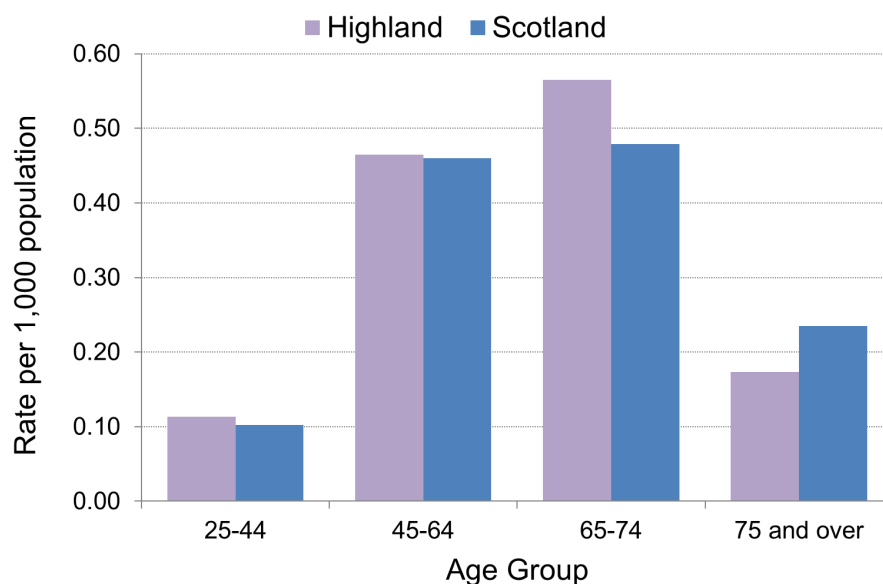
Table 2: Age specific alcohol-specific deaths per 1,000 population, total for 2020 to 2024

| Age Group | Highland | | | Scotland | | |
|-------------|----------|---------|----------------|----------|---------|----------------|
| | Deaths | Percent | Rate per 1,000 | Deaths | Percent | Rate per 1,000 |
| 25-44 | 30 | 9.9% | 0.11 | 705 | 11.4% | 0.10 |
| 45-64 | 162 | 53.6% | 0.46 | 3,443 | 55.8% | 0.46 |
| 65-74 | 87 | 28.8% | 0.56 | 1,435 | 23.2% | 0.48 |
| 75 and over | 22 | 7.3% | 0.17 | 584 | 9.5% | 0.23 |
| All aged | 302 | 100.0% | 0.26 | 6,173 | 100.0% | 0.23 |

Source: National Records of Scotland

Highland alcohol-specific mortality in the 65-74 age group is slightly higher than that of the overall Scotland rate (0.56 per 1,000 population compared to 0.48 per 1,000 population) and the Highland rate is lower in the 75 and over age group (0.17 per 1,000 population compared to 0.23 per 1,000 population).

Figure 4: Alcohol-specific deaths per 1,000 population by age group, Highland and Scotland; 5-year total 2020-2024



Source: National Records of Scotland

Further detail is provided in the National Records of Scotland Report.

Frances Matthewson
 Research and Intelligence Specialist
 Highland Alcohol and Alcohol Partnership
 November 2025