Drug use deaths in Highland

2025 Briefing Paper

1. Introduction

In September 2026 National Records of Scotland (NRS) published statistics on drug use deaths registered in Scotland during 2025. Information is available for each local authority and health board on the overall trend, age at death, underlying cause of death and the type of drugs implicated in, or which potentially contributed to, the death. Information about the underlying cause of death has been added to from NRS data available locally. This paper summarises the main results of deaths for the Highland Alcohol and Drugs Partnership (HADP) area and is based on Highland Council residents.

2. Key Points

- 24 drug use deaths were registered in Highland in 2025, an increase of 3 deaths from 2024 (21 deaths);
- The annual average number of deaths for the five-year period 2021-2025 is 30, an increase of 12 deaths (64%) on the 2011-2015 average of 18 deaths;
- Highland has a drug use death rate (age standardised rate, ASR) of 13.8 per 100,000 population (2021 – 2025), which is significantly lower than the national death rate of 21.6 per 100,000 population. Drug use deaths in Highland have a slightly younger profile compared to those for Scotland as a whole;
- In 2025,
    - one or more opiates/opioids contributed to 23 out of 24 deaths (96%);
        - dihydrocodeine was implicated in 10 deaths (42%);
        - heroin or morphine were implicated in 7 deaths (29%);
    - benzodiazepines contributed to 14 deaths (58%); and
    - cocaine was implicated in 7 deaths (29%).
- The most common underlying cause of death in 2025 was accidental poisoning (18 deaths, 75%), with most of the remaining deaths (21%) classified as intentional self-poisoning;
- In 2025, people who experienced a drug use death in Scotland were 15 times more likely to have lived in the most deprived areas (SIMD 1) than in the least deprived areas (SIMD 5). The association of deprivation with Drug use deaths is much greater than with other causes of death.

3. Drug-related deaths – terminology and data

The National Records of Scotland (NRS) produce an annual publication that provides statistics of 'drug use deaths' which were registered in Scotland and uses an established definition based upon the cause of death identified on death registrations and information supplied by forensic pathologists.[1]

In previous years, and starting with the publication for 2020, the NRS report had referred to these as 'drug misuse deaths'. To avoid a move towards the use of stigmatising language, HADP had continued to use the term 'drug-related deaths' where nationally NRS referred to 'drug misuse deaths'[2].

Following feedback from users of the statistics including Highland ADP, for the 2025 annual publication, NRS changed their terminology from 'drug misuse deaths' to 'drug use deaths'. To align with NRS, the term 'drug use deaths' has been used for this briefing and any future local reporting of national and local figures by Highland ADP.

For Highland these data report upon deaths registered during 2025 of either Highland Council area residents, persons of no fixed abode who died in Highland or people resident outside Scotland who died in Highland. Full details of the definitions and methods are available in the national report *Drug-related deaths in Scotland, 2025* and the NRS website.[1,3]

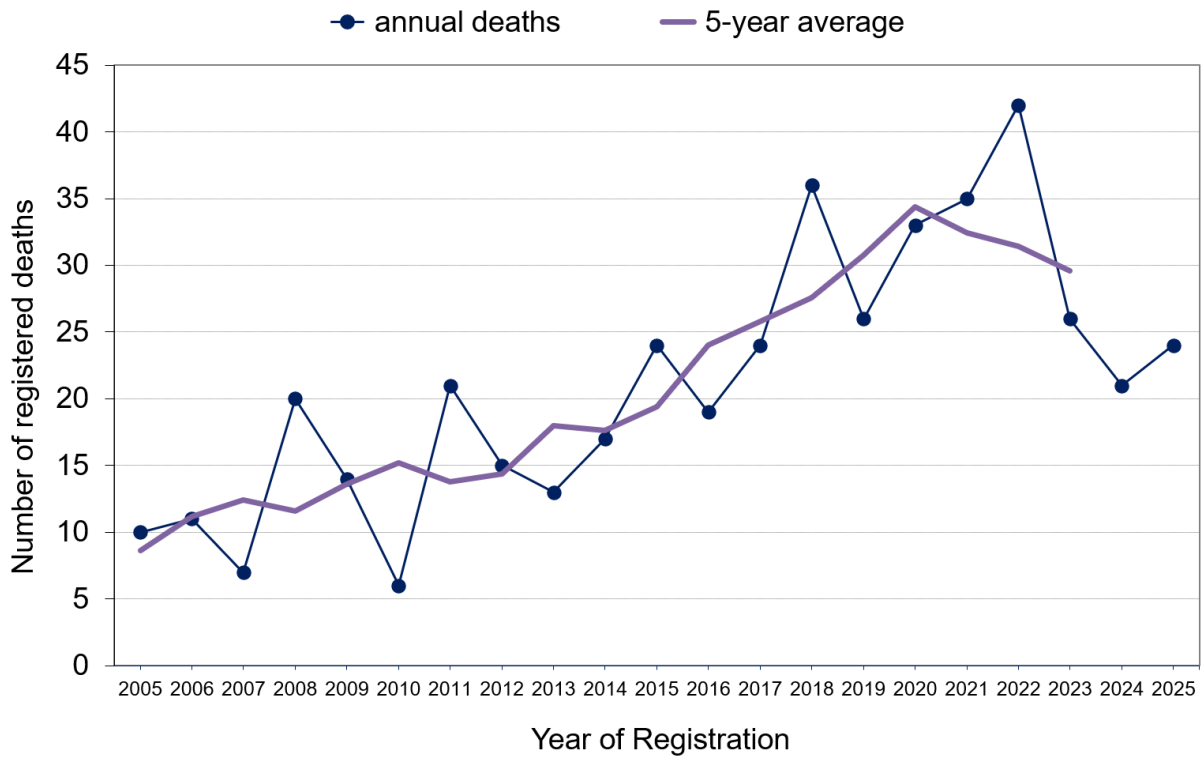
[1] National Records of Scotland *Drug-related deaths in Scotland, 2025*; (2026) https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/publications/drug-related-deaths-in-scotland-2025/
[2] Language Matters: communicating about people, alcohol, and drugs (2021) https://www.highland substanceawareness.scot.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Language-Matters.pdf
[3] National Records Scotland *Drug-related deaths in Scotland, 2025 - Methodological Annexes* (2026); https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/media/4imlc5ni/drug-related-deaths-methodology-annexes.pdf

4. Highland Numbers

Over the latest year, the number of drug use deaths increased in 20 council areas across Scotland and increased in Scotland overall. Like so many other areas in Scotland there has been an increase in the number of drug use deaths in Highland in 2025. There were 24 drug use deaths registered in Highland in 2025 compared to 21 in 2024, an increase of 3 deaths. The numbers of drug use 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 5-year annual averages, which 'smooth out' the effects of annual variation.

Comparing the annual average for the five-year period 2021-2025 (30 deaths) with that for 2011-2015 (18 deaths) shows that the average annual number of drug use deaths has increased by 12 deaths (64%). The thick solid line in Figure 1 shows that the overall trend in drug use mortality in Highland has been increasing, most significantly over the last decade, with slight decreases in the last three five-year periods.

Figure 1. Number of drug use deaths for Highland Council area, annual number and 5 year annual moving averages; 2005 to 2025



Source: National Records of Scotland
Note: 5 year annual moving averages have been shown against the middle year in the time period.

5. Comparison with Scotland

In 2025, there were 1,133 drug use deaths registered in Scotland, an increase of 11% (116 deaths) compared with 2024. The number of drug use deaths in Highland can be compared with those nationally by expressing the average number of deaths as an age standardised rate (ASR) per 100,000 population. Using the average annual number of deaths for 2021-2025, age-standardised mortality rates are 21.6 per 100,000 and 13.8 per 100,000 population for all ages for Scotland and Highland respectively during 2021 – 2025 (Table 1). The Highland rate (ASR) is significantly below the national average of 21.6 per 100,000 population and remains the seventh lowest of the thirty-one council areas reported in Scotland (2021-2025).

Table 1: Drug use deaths: total deaths, annual average number and age-standardised rate per 100,000 population, all ages

	Total number of deaths in period		Average annual number of deaths		Age-standardised rate per 100,000 population	
	2011-2015	2021-2025	2011-2015	2021-2025	2011-2015	2021-2025
Highland	90	148	18	30	8.2	13.8
Scotland	3012	5703	602	1141	11.3	21.6

Source: National Records of Scotland

Further indication of drug use death rates can be made relative to prevalence estimates of the number of people that are of increased risk due to problem drug use. Public Health Scotland have released statistics which are in development based on a new methodology for estimating the prevalence of opioid dependence in Scotland.[4,5] Estimated prevalence in Scotland is 1.23% (95% Credible Interval (CrI): 1.19% to 1.28%) of people ages 15 to 64 years. This corresponds to an estimate of 43,400 people (95% CrI: 41,900 to 45,100) with opioid dependence ages 15 to 64 years resident in Scotland in 2022/23. The application of the new methodology is limited at present to seven of the more highly populated Boards in Scotland. Consequently, crude estimates have been generated for NHS Highland with further work underway to assess the limitations of the approach and the accuracy of these estimates. Initial findings for NHS Highland estimate in 2022/23, the number of people with opioid dependence was 1300 (95% CrI: 1100 to 1600). This represents an estimated prevalence in NHS Highland of 0.66% (95% CrI: 0.57% to 0.79%) of people ages 15 to 64 years. These prevalence estimates of opioid dependence place NHS Highland dependence levels considerably below the level for Scotland. This may partly explain the lower levels of drug use deaths locally given that opioids are implicated in about 80% of drug use deaths nationally.

People living in the most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD 1) were 15 times as likely to die from a drug use death in 2025 compared to people in the least deprived areas (SIMD 5). In contrast, 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.[6]

[4] Public Health Scotland *Estimated Prevalence of Opioid Dependence in Scotland* (2025); https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/26285/2025-03-19-opioid-prevalence-report.pdf
[5] Public Health Scotland *Estimated Prevalence of Opioid Dependence in Scotland* (2025) https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/32049/2025-03-18-opioid-prevalence-report.pdf
[6] Scottish Government. Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation: data and resources 2021 https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/

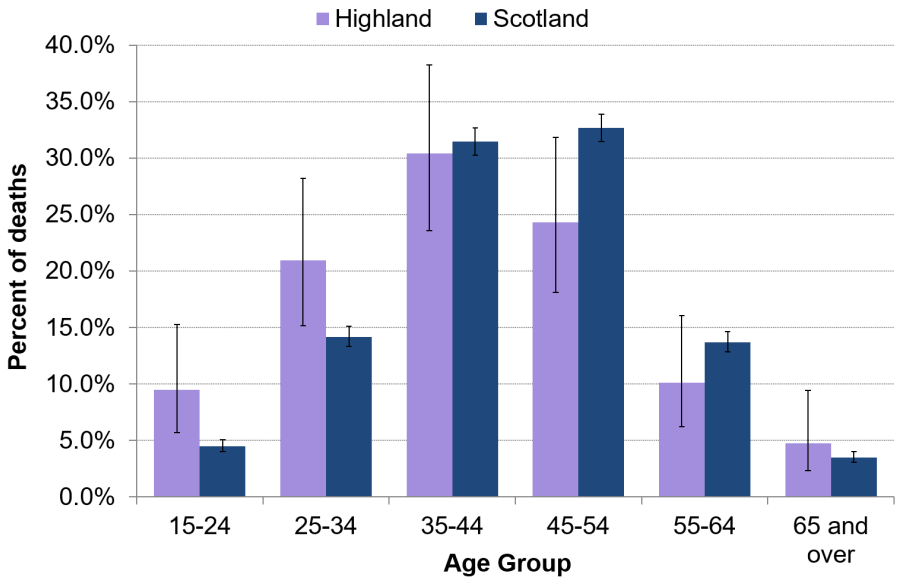
6. Drug use deaths by sex

In Highland, the latest increase in drug use deaths in 2025 was driven by an increase in male deaths and a slight decrease in female deaths. In 2025, there were 17 male drug use deaths, an increase of 42% (5 deaths) from 2024. There were 7 female drug use deaths in 2025, a decrease of 22% (2 deaths) from the previous year. This was similar to the national trends over the same time period. In the early 2000s, the rate of male drug use deaths nationally was around five times as high as the rate for females. Both nationally and locally, the gap between sexes in the rate of drug use deaths has narrowed over time. Female deaths account for an increasing proportion of deaths over time in Highland increasing from 22% in 2011-2015 to 29% in 2016-2020 and increasing to 32% of deaths in 2021-2025, which is closer to the national figure of 31% for the same period.

7. Age at Death

In Highland, between 2021 and 2025 there were 14 drug use deaths of people ages 15-24 years (9% of all deaths), 31 deaths in the 25-34 age group (21%), 45 deaths in the 35-44 age group (30%) and 58 deaths of people ages 45 years and over (39%). Figure 2 shows that while there is a lower rate (ASR) per 100,000 deaths in Highland compared to the national rate (13.8 and 21.6 respectively) there is a significantly higher proportion of deaths in the 15-24 and 25-34 year age groups in Highland, compared to the national profile. This illustrates that overall drug use deaths in Highland have a slightly younger profile compared to those for Scotland as a whole.

Figure 2: Drug use deaths percentage by age group, Highland and Scotland; 5-year average 2021-2025



Source: National Records of Scotland

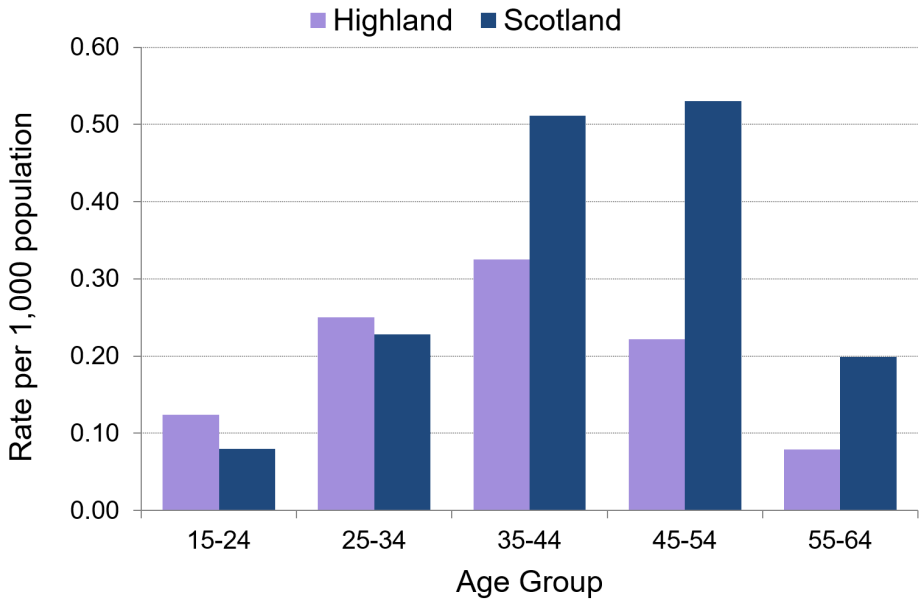
The age-specific rates of drug use deaths for Highland compared to Scotland is shown in Table 2 and Figure 3. Highland drug use mortality in the 35-44 age group is lower than that of the overall Scotland rate; 0.33 per 1,000 population compared to 0.51 per 1,000

population. Similarly, the Highland drug use mortality in the 45-54 age group and the 55-64 age group is less than half that of the overall Scotland rates; 0.22 per 1,000 population compared to 0.53 per 1,000 population for ages 45 to 54 and 0.08 per 1,000 population compared to 0.20 per 1,000 population for ages 55 to 64.

Table 2: Age specific drug use deaths per 1,000 population, total for 2021 to 2025

	Highland			Scotland		
Age Group	Deaths	Percent	Rate per 1,000	Deaths	Percent	Rate per 1,000
15-24	14	9%	0.12	258	5%	0.08
25-34	31	21%	0.25	809	14%	0.23
35-44	45	30%	0.33	1793	31%	0.51
45-54	36	24%	0.22	1863	33%	0.53
55-64	15	10%	0.08	781	14%	0.20
All ages	148	100%	0.13	5703	100%	0.21
Source: National Records of Scotland						

Figure 3: Drug use deaths per 1,000 population by age group, Highland and Scotland; 5-year total 2021-2025

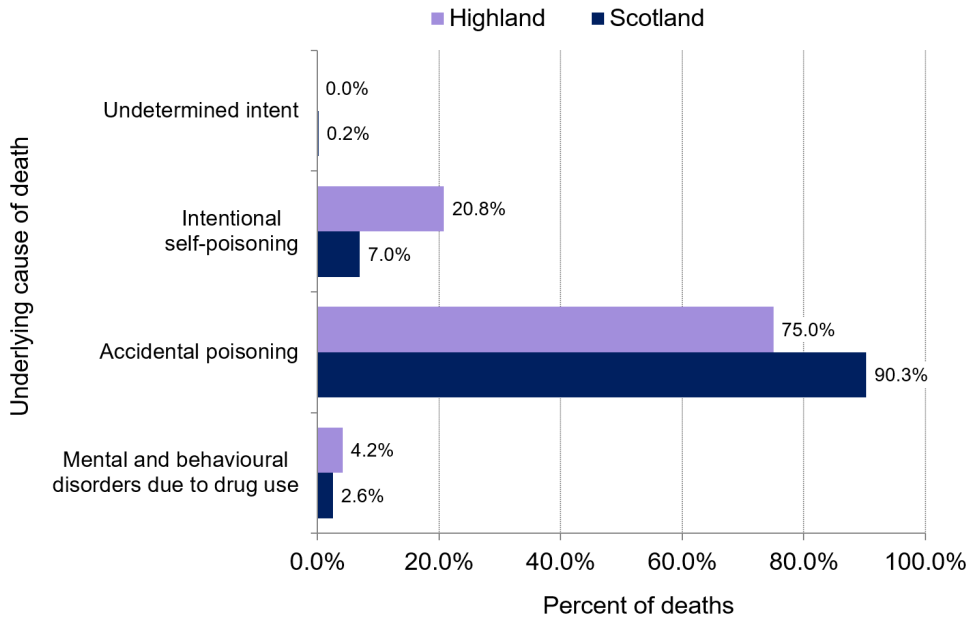


Source: National Records of Scotland

8. Underlying cause of death

The underlying cause of death is reported by a standard set of diagnostic groupings based upon International Classification of Diseases Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes. Figure 4 shows that during 2025 the majority of deaths in Highland (18 deaths, 75%) were attributed to accidental poisoning. These are deaths where a drug listed under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) was found to be present in the body at the time of death, even if it did not directly contribute to the outcome. There were 5 deaths (21%) classified as intentional self-poisoning and these deaths may also be reported nationally as suicides.

Figure 4: Drug use deaths by underlying cause of death, Highland and Scotland, 2025



Source: National Records of Scotland

9. Drugs reported in deaths

The type of drug either implicated in, or potentially contributing to, drug use deaths in Highland between 2021 and 2025 is shown in Table 3. In 2025 benzodiazepines were implicated in 14 deaths (58%), cocaine in 7 deaths (29%), heroin and/or morphine in 7 deaths (29%) and methadone in 3 deaths (13%).

Table 3: Number of drug use deaths by selected drugs implicated, Highland, 2021 to 2025

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
All drug use deaths	**35**	**42**	**26**	**21**	**24**
Any opiate or opioid	30	31	22	16	23
- Heroin and/or morphine	10	14	7	5	7
- Methadone	14	12	6	5	3
- Buprenorphine	4	0	1	1	1
- Codeine or a codeine-containing compound	4	3	2	1	1
- Dihydrocodeine or d.h.c-containing compound	11	8	10	0	10
- Nitazenes	n/a	n/a	0	3	1
- Fentanyls	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	0
Any Benzodiazepine	22	17	15	9	14
- any "Prescribable" benzodiazepine	15	12	11	4	12
- Diazepam	12	11	8	3	11
- any "Street" benzodiazepine	17	8	9	7	5
- Etizolam	22	17	15	0	0
- Bromazolam	n/a	n/a	7	6	2
Gabapentin and/or Pregabalin	15	5	11	2	6
Cocaine	7	14	11	7	7
Ecstasy-type	0	2	0	1	0
Amphetamines	5	3	1	1	0
Xylazine	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	0
Ketamine	0	0	0	1	1
Alcohol	6	2	2	1	4

Source: National Records of Scotland

Notes:
1. More than one drug may be reported per death.
2. Routine testing of some drugs was not carried out in post mortems prior to 2024 so data for years preceding 2024 are not available in some categories.

A comparison across the five year time period from 2021 and 2025 shows that:-

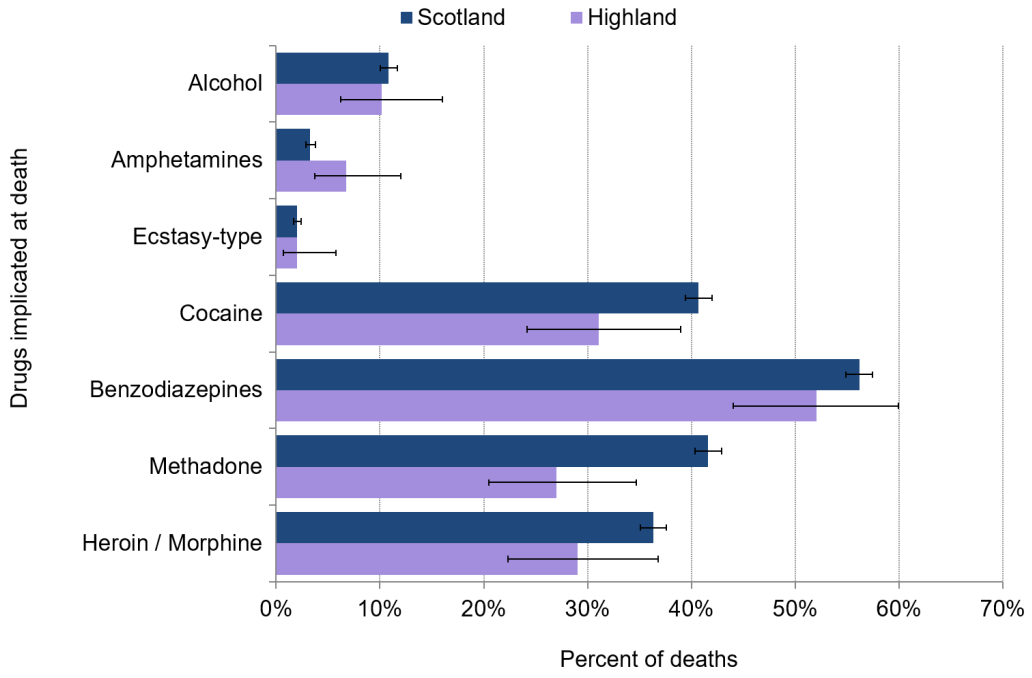
- One or more opiates or opioids were present in the majority of cases; 30 out of 35 deaths in 2021 (86%) and 23 out of 24 deaths in 2025 (96%).
    - Methadone has been implicated in a decreasing number of deaths since 2021 compared with previous years; 14 out of 35 deaths in 2021 (40%) and 3 out of 24 deaths in 2025 (13%).
    - Dihydrocodeine (DHC) compounds contributed to ten deaths (42%) in 2025. While this was the highest contributor across deaths reporting opiates or opioids in 2025, these compounds were not implicated in any deaths in 2024.

    - Fentanyls and xylazine are also newly reported drugs and while they did not contribute to any deaths in Highland in 2025, they were recorded in 3 (1%) deaths and 4 (1%) drug use deaths respectively in Scotland.
    - Deaths in which nitazenes were implicated have been newly reported from 2024; one death (4%) was reported for Highland in 2025 compared with this group of potent synthetic opioids being reported in more than one in five drug use deaths nationally (22%, 247 deaths).
- The number of deaths associated with benzodiazepines have shown slight variation across this five year period where they contributed within the range between 40% (17 deaths) in 2022 to 63% (22 deaths) in 2021.
    - Bromazolam was implicated in 2 deaths (8%) for Highland in 2025 compared with 103 deaths (9%) nationally.
- Cocaine was implicated in 7 deaths (29%) in Highland in 2025 compared with 589 deaths (52%) nationally.
- Gabapentin and/or pregabalin contributed to 6 deaths (25%) in 2025 with variability in previous years ranging from 5 deaths (12%) in 2022 to 15 deaths (43%) in 2021.

While some caution must be made in interpreting figures for a single year they do provide important intelligence for local drug trends.

The type of drugs implicated in or potentially contributing to drug use deaths in Highland, can be compared with those nationally using the average annual deaths for 2021-2025 (Figure 5). For the five-year period there have been significantly fewer deaths in Highland where methadone or cocaine was reported compared to Scotland.

Figure 5: Drug use deaths by selected drugs reported, Highland and Scotland, 5-year period 2021-2025 (with 95% confidence intervals)



Source: National Records of Scotland

New psychoactive substances (NPSs) are drugs which have been made to mimic the effects of illegal substances such as cocaine or ecstasy. These drugs have become more common in recent years, and many have also now become controlled. Information about NPSs is only available nationally and in 2025 in Scotland, there were 427 drug use deaths where controlled NPSs were implicated. The majority of NPSs involved were benzodiazepines-type and these were implicated in 248 deaths (58%).

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

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