

Scotland Update UK Drug Death Conference Liverpool John Moores University

National Mission & selected highlights on action to reduce drug harms

28 March 2025

Elinor Dickie, Organisational Lead, Preventing Health Harms - Drugs Team



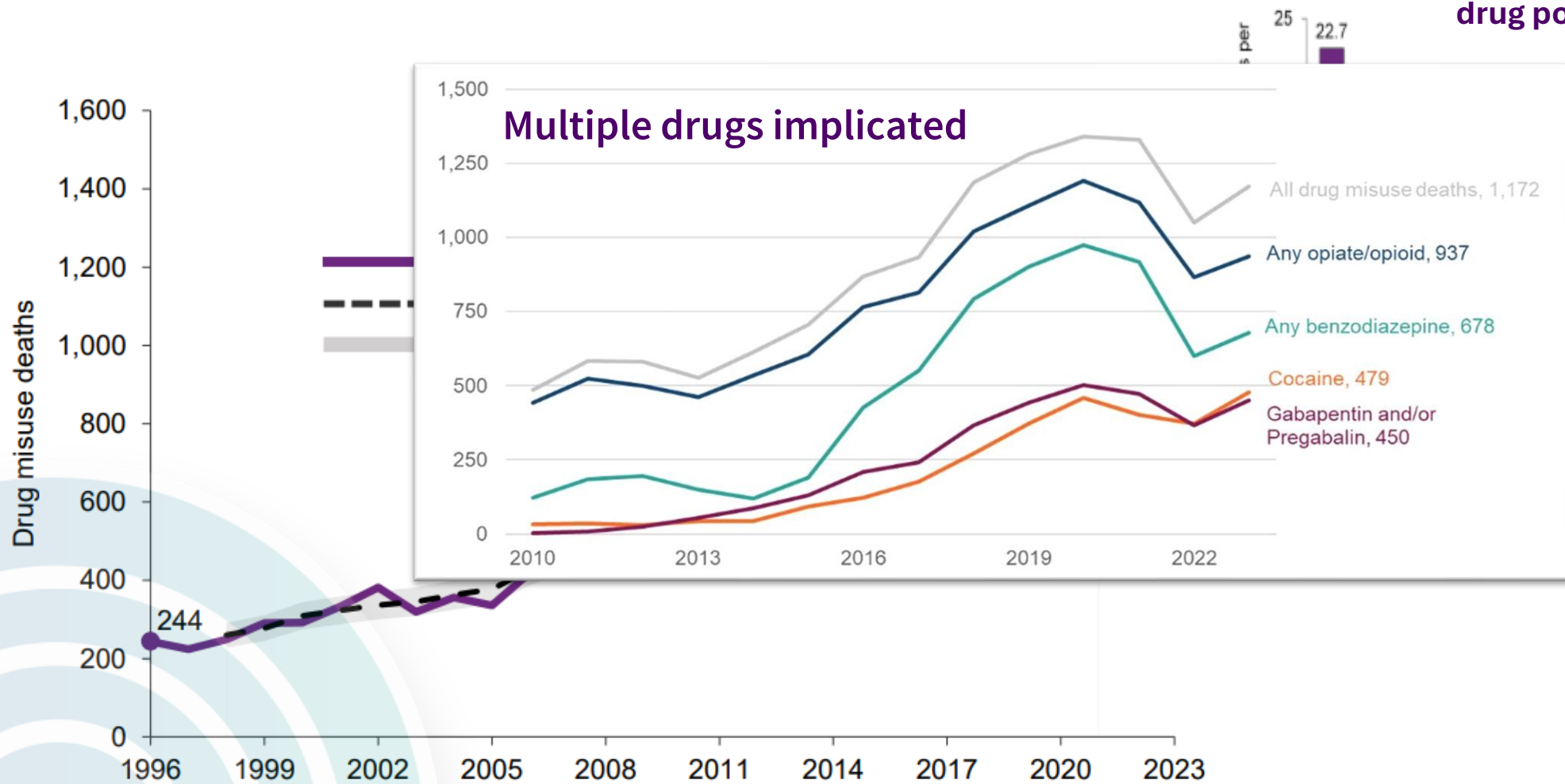
Acknowledgements

Alcohol & Drug Partnerships, treatment and harm reduction services, peers and recovery networks, SDF, Scottish Government, SFAD, SRC, Police Scotland, Scottish Ambulance Service, National Records Scotland
PHS Colleagues: Drugs Team, MIST, BBV, Evaluation

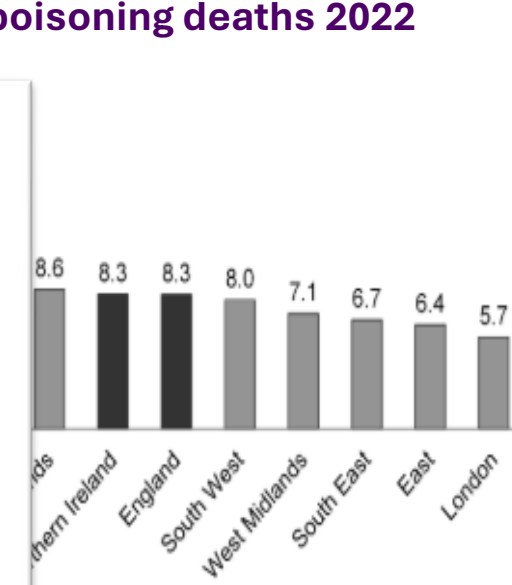
Drug deaths in Scotland – current and emerging trends

Drug-related deaths in Scotland 2023

National Records of Scotland

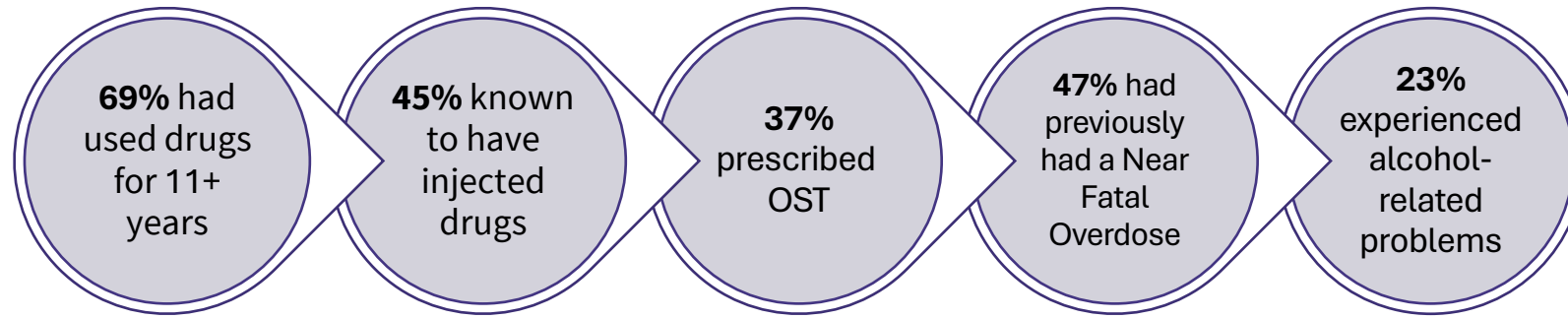


UK countries and regions, drug poisoning deaths 2022

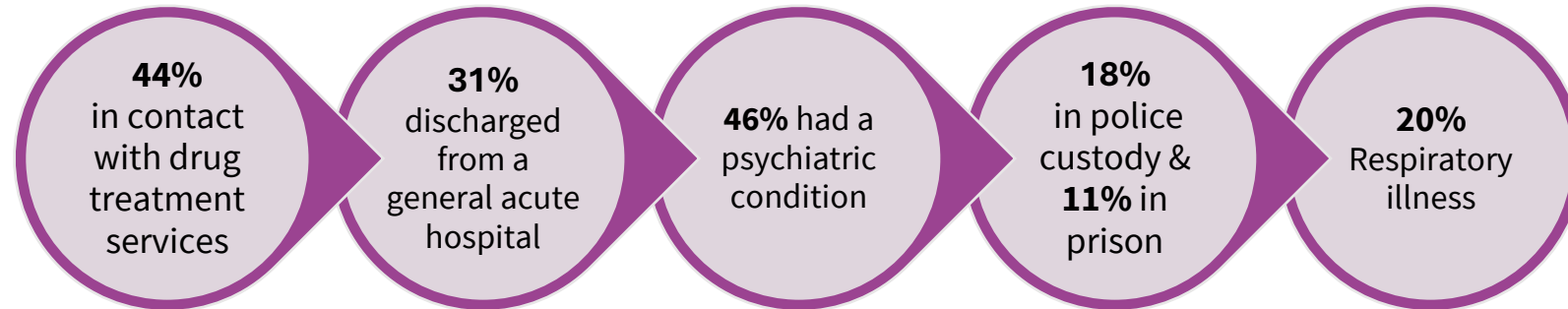


National Drug-Related Deaths Database: context of deaths in 2020

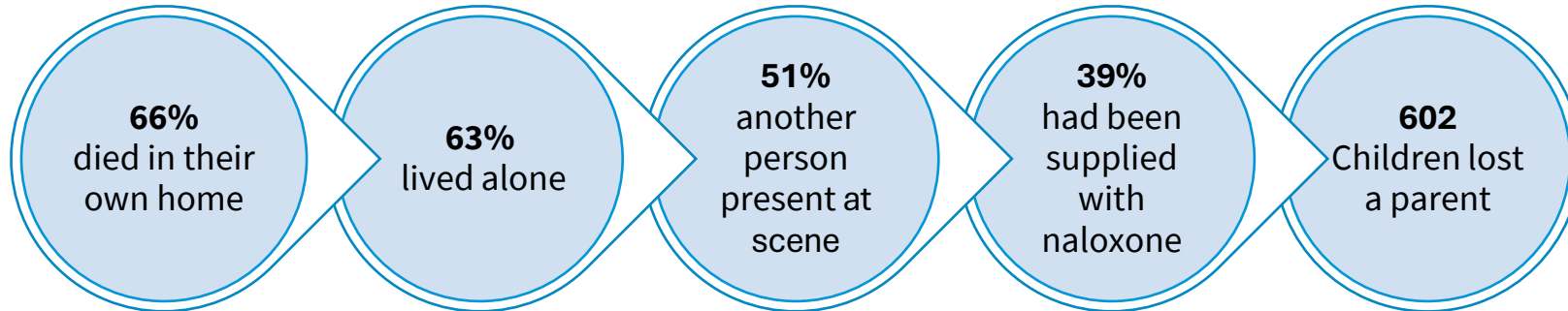
Drug use history



In the six months prior to death



At time of death....



Based on 1.335 records of deaths in 2020, published October 2024



Scottish Government National Mission: Reducing deaths and improving lives



Cross-Cutting Priorities

Lived Experience at the Heart

Surveillance and Data Informed

Equalities and Human Rights

Resilient and Skilled Workforce

Tackle Stigma

Psychologically Informed

Partnership response – from data to intelligence

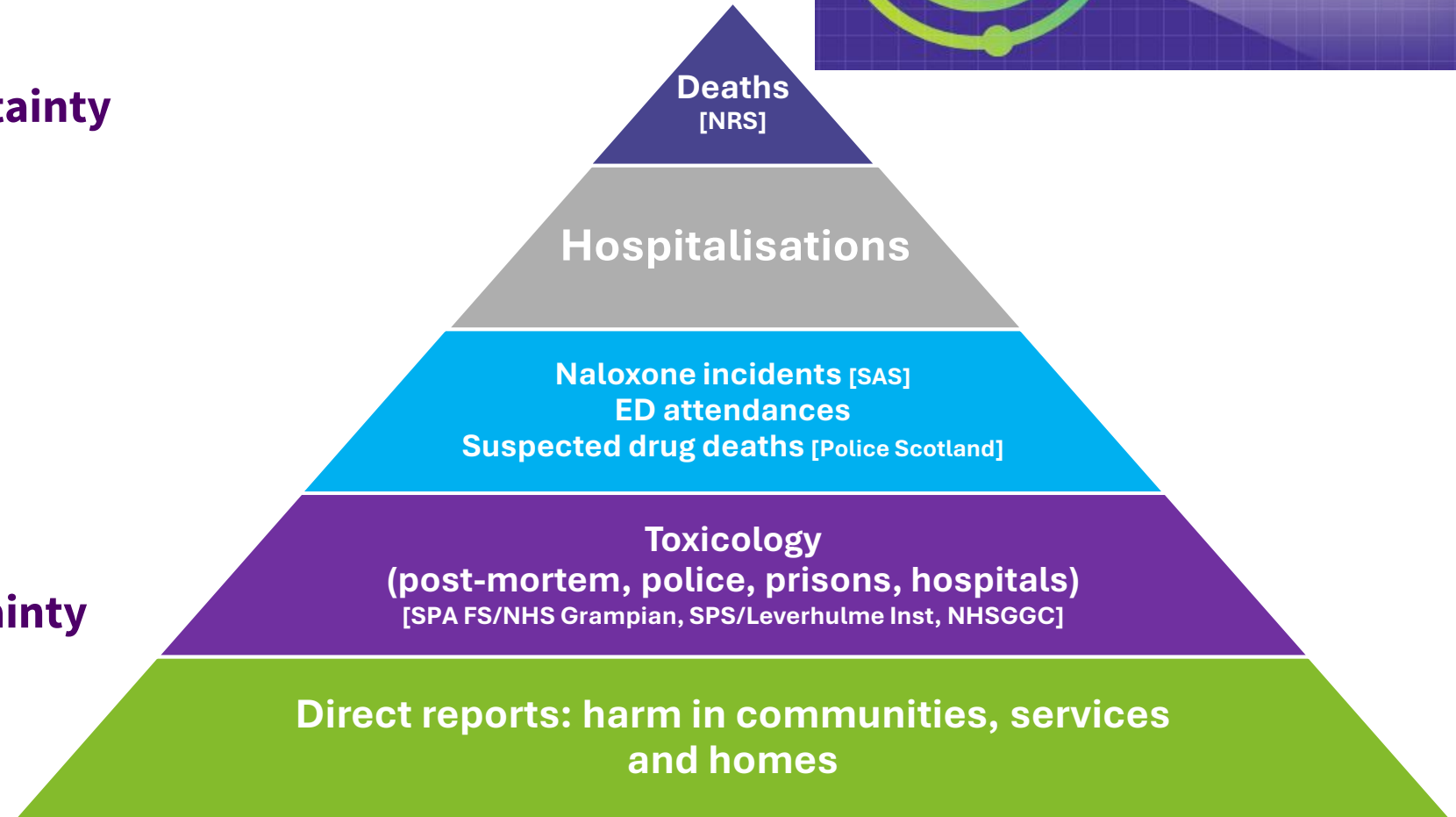


Managing uncertainty: Risk assessment

time delay | high certainty



real time | low certainty



Available data:

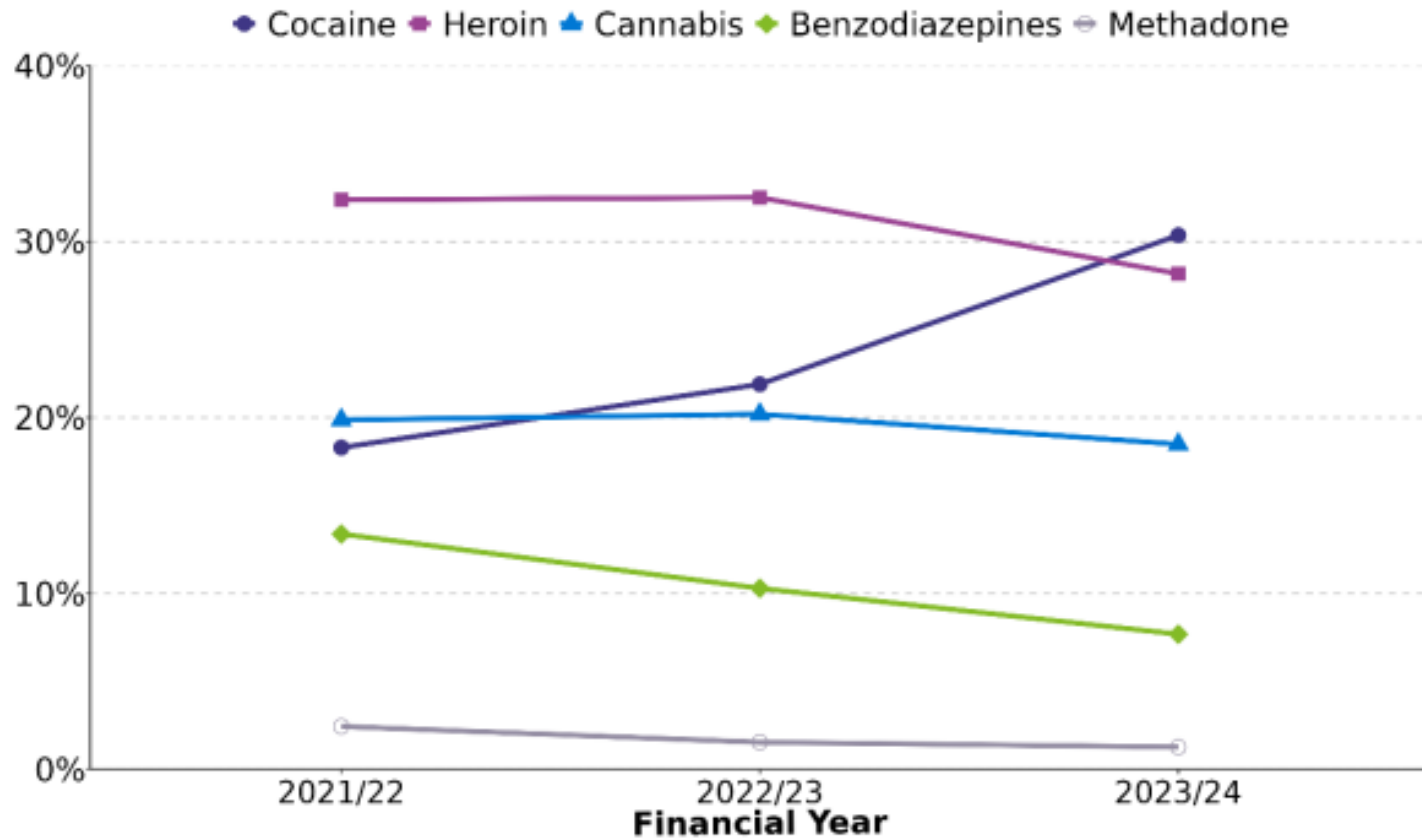
[RADAR Quarterly Reports \(next publ 29 Apr\)](#)
& [dashboard](#)



System changes: needs and response

Initial assessment for specialist drug treatment (DAISy)

Main drug used among people reporting recent illicit drug use, by financial year (NHS Scotland, 2021/22 to 2023/24)



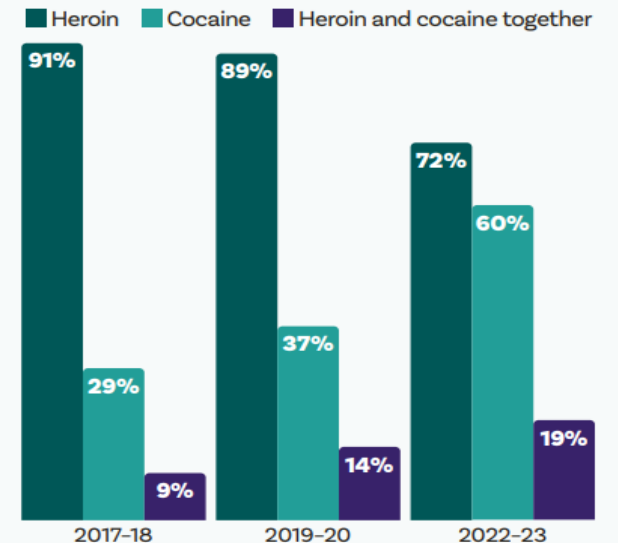
Source: Public Health Scotland

Needle Exchange Surveillance Initiative (NESI)

NESI 2022-23 data highlights changes in risk behaviours, interventions and harms among people who inject drugs in Scotland

Risk behaviours

While heroin remains the most commonly injected drug, reported **injecting of cocaine** has increased dramatically.



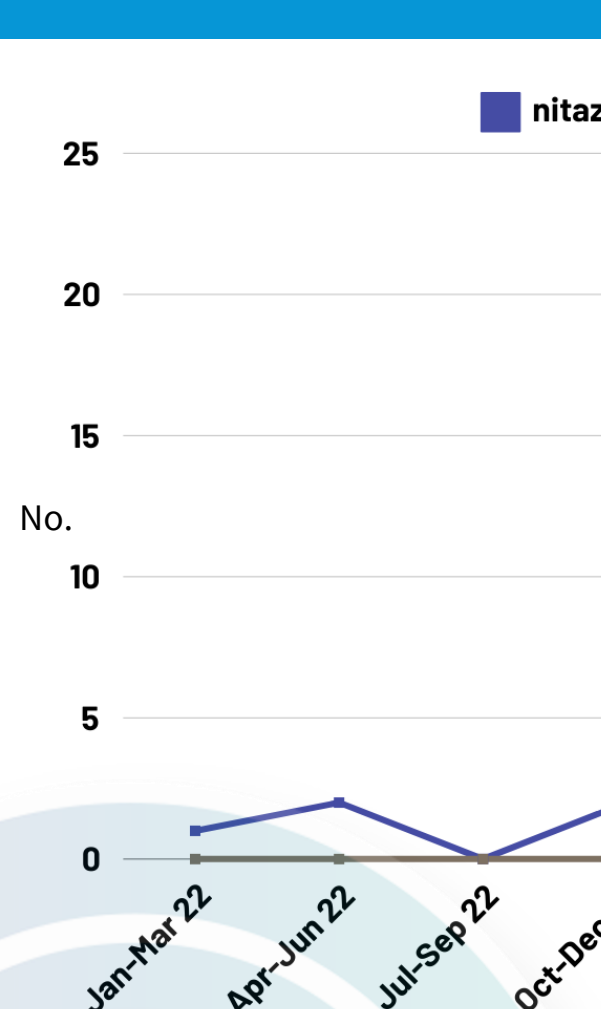
* in the last six months

In 2022-23, of those who reported injecting in the last six months, almost half also reported smoking and/or snorting crack.

45%



Emergence of new synthetics



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Home > Publications > Rapid Action Drug Alerts and Response (RADAR) Alert: Bromazepam > Rapid Action Drug Alerts and Response (RADAR) Alert: Bromazepam - version 1.2 > Public health alert: New benzodiazepines - Bromazepam (RADAR)

Rapid Action Drug Alerts and Response (RADAR) Alert: Bromazepam

Version 1.2 [Show version history](#)
 Published 16 January 2025 (Latest release)
 Type Guidance
 Author Public Health Scotland

Drugs

Public health alert: New benzodiazepines – Bromazepam

Alert area: Scotland

Action required by:

- people working and volunteering in drug and alcohol services
- emergency services
- healthcare and medical settings
- high-risk settings such as prisons and hostels

Action required: Provide harm reduction interventions for benzodiazepines and polydrug use – see sections marked for specific actions.

Alert number: 2023/13
 Version number: 1.2
 Release date: 5 July 2023
 Updated: 16 January 2025
 Valid until: 16 January 2026

Contents:

- Public health alert: New benzodiazepines – Bromazepam
- Summary
- Benzodiazepines
- Bromazepam
- Recognising and responding to a benzodiazepine overdose
- Information for people who take drugs and community members
- Actions for high-risk settings
- Actions for drug and alcohol service staff
- Actions for emergency service, clinical and healthcare staff
- Legal status
- More information

Changing risks

Detected in a wider range of drugs

Wider area

More common and consistent detections

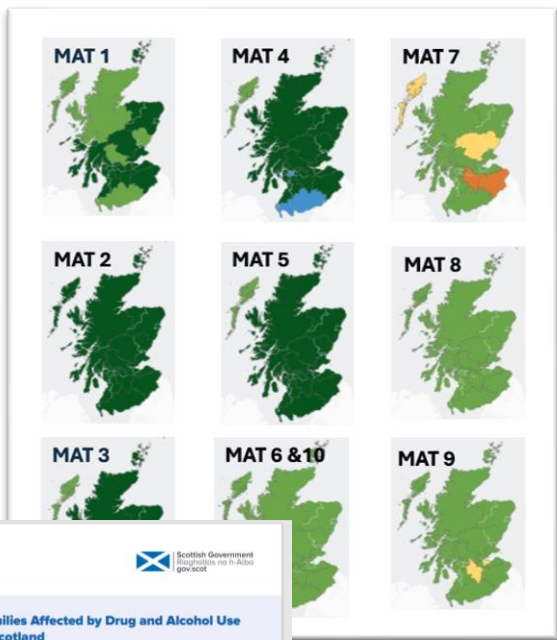
Post-mortem toxicology



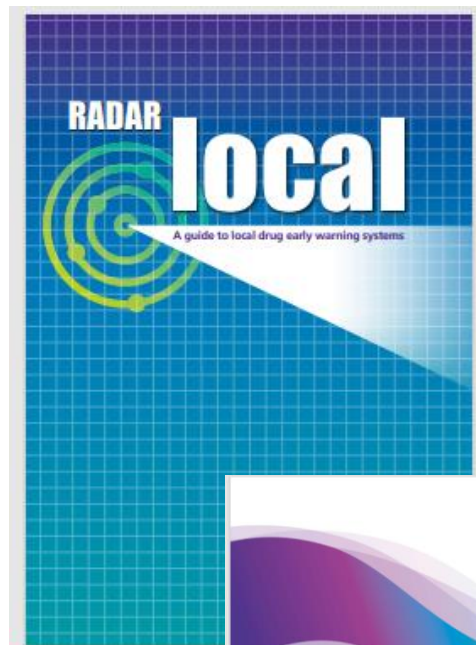
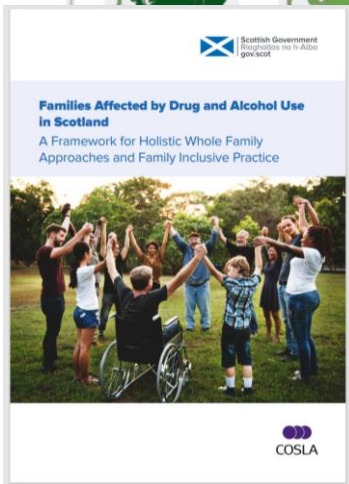
Current response (selected highlights)

Infrastructure support and development – learning and improvement

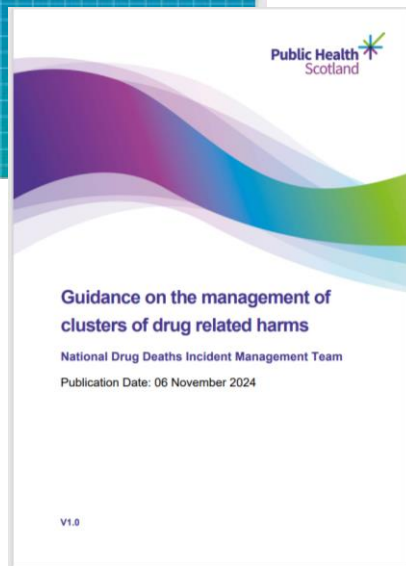
MAT Standards progress,
July 2024



Scottish Government
2021



PHS/RADAR
Oct 2023



PHS/Directors of Public Health November 2024



12 groups across
Scotland (100+
weekly attendees)



SG/National Collaborative December 2024

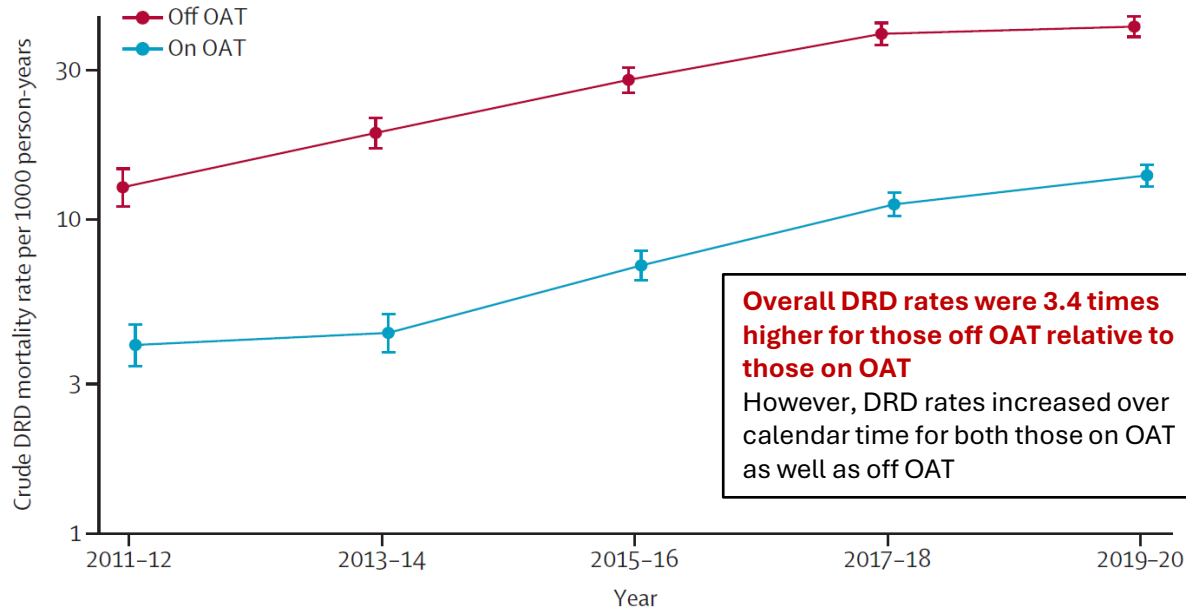




contact: phs.shield@phs.scot

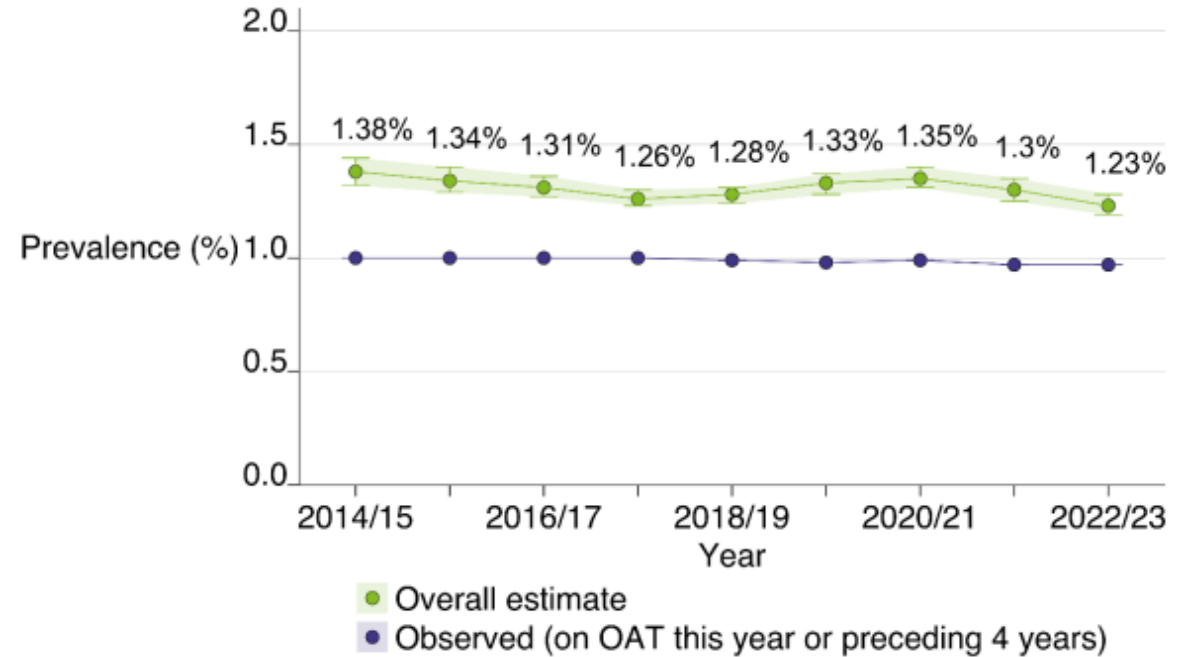
Evaluating the impact of Public Health interventions in reducing harms related to Substance Use in Scotland (EPHeSUS)

Crude drug-related death rates (log scale) among those prescribed OAT in Scotland by OAT status, 2011-2020



McAuley A, et al. Lancet Public Health, June 2023.

Estimated prevalence (%) of opioid dependence among the population aged 15-64 years in Scotland; 2024/15 to 2022/23.



Public Health Scotland 2025.



Emerging impact and ongoing learning

National Mission Evaluation

PHS commissioned by Scottish Government

Positive impact of the National Mission:
strengthened treatment systems

Data developments

Unintended negative consequences: increased
pressure on workforce and loss of focus on alcohol

Lived Experience
Survey

coordinated, robust,
longitudinal approach

Stakeholders report important gaps:

Residential rehab
core minimum
dataset

what works for
whom

- The role of other sectors (housing, employment, education)
- Mental health support.
- Addressing harm from drugs other than opioids
- Getting the basic workforce infrastructure right.
- Prevention.



Ongoing challenges & unmet needs

Polysubstance use harms



MAT standards informed response for benzodiazepine harm reduction

Call to action

The unprecedented harm associated with street benzodiazepines in Scotland is a public health emergency that demands a different approach. The false notion that postponing change in prescribing practice is the safest position and the current status quo, is unacceptable. The current rate of high levels of benzodiazepine related harm seen in Scotland qualify in the Orange Guidelines as 'exceptional circumstances'. We all have a responsibility to listen to, assess and understand a person's unique story of benzodiazepine use to identify appropriate treatment and care. Initial conversations should address immediate risk of harm, particularly overdose and death. Conversations should be underpinned by principles of psychological and trauma informed care including safety, empowerment, choice, collaboration and trust, in line with the MAT standards (see summary in Appendix A).

There is no straightforward, one-size-fits-all approach to reduce harm from street benzodiazepines. Existing literature has limited applicability to the current Scottish context and national evaluation of current practice is needed. This guidance aims to set out key principles which align with the MAT standards designed for all staff supporting those who present with high risks of drug-related harm.

- Be prepared to talk about benzodiazepine harm reduction
- Empathic listening – seek to understand
- Needs-based assessment
- Zone of accepted risk – collaborative risk assessment
- Offer benzodiazepine harm reduction
- Shared goals – review progress

In recognition of the levels of harm within this cohort this guidance encourages flexible and individualised higher intensity care; in particular to support staff working in specialist treatment services who are regularly engaging with people using street benzodiazepines as well as opioids. Included is information on immediate changes you can make and action you can take to actively reduce harms by forming therapeutic relationships which consider the prescribing of benzodiazepines and the safe and effective delivery of appropriate psychosocial interventions.



NHSGGC Alcohol and Drug Recovery Services Cocaine Toolkit



THE SCOTTISH DRUG CHECKING PROJECT

Due in 2025:
testing at services

- Aberdeen
- Glasgow
- Dundee



Drug market changes



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Home > News > PHS urges caution after increase in sudden overdoses in Scotland

PHS urges caution after increase in sudden overdoses in Scotland

First published on 14 March 2025

Public Health Scotland (PHS) is urging caution, following reports of an increase in fatal and near fatal overdoses in people using heroin in recent weeks.

Some overdoses have been characterised by sudden and rapid collapse, with many requiring multiple doses of naloxone to reverse the overdose. Rapid testing has identified a nitazene-type opioid in some heroin samples linked to these overdoses, with further testing underway to determine the specific type.

Care and support for people at risk and those affected is being managed locally by multi-agency partners, including alcohol and drug partnerships, public health teams, urgent care providers and drug services. The overdoses have occurred across Scotland in multiple areas however the nature of Scotland's drug supply means that people in all areas may be at increased risk of harm. Services across the country have been alerted to ensure appropriate action and support.

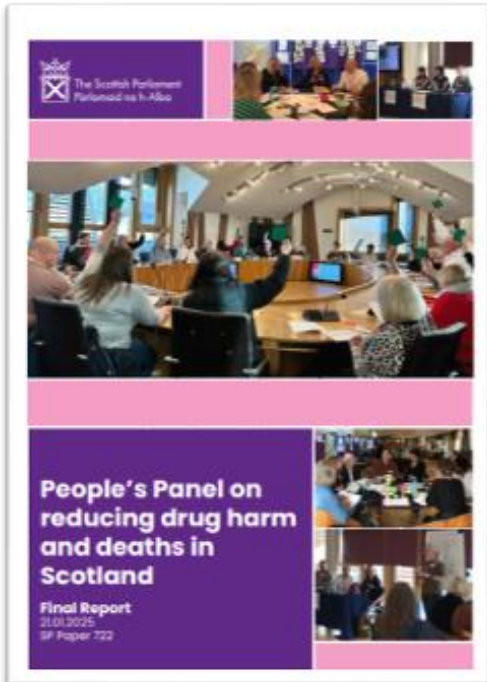
Rapid Action Drug Alerts and in December 2023, has been raised to raise awareness of the risk of overdose when the drug supply in all areas has been influenced and raised.

PHS said: "The presence of nitazenes within the heroin supply is a concern as they are stronger than heroin and a small amount poses an increased risk of overdose when used."



What next? Further focus.

From mitigation to prevention: addressing the determinants of harms



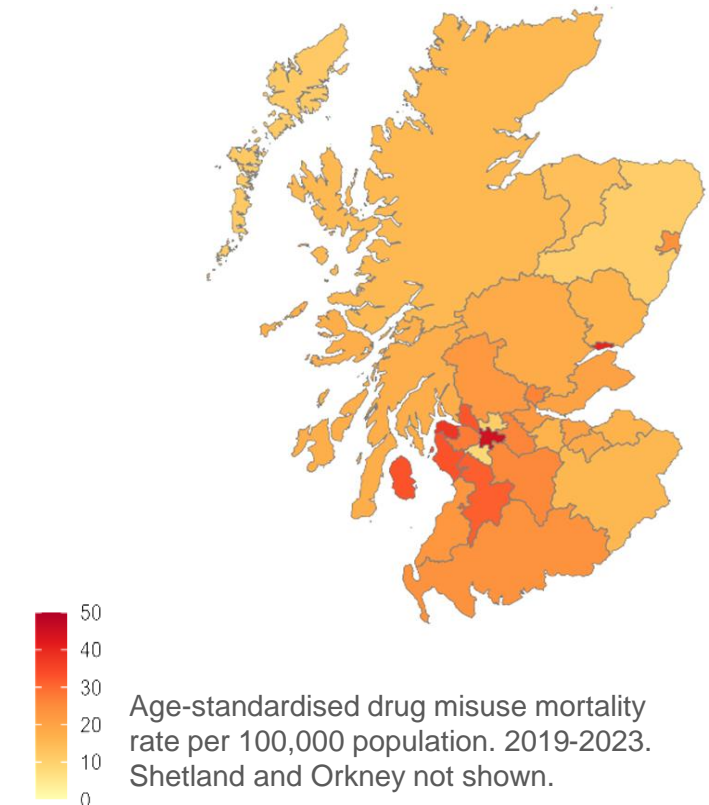
“There needs to be an urgent examination of the issues around poverty. So that one of the fundamental contributors to drugs harm and death can be addressed.

Because the panel have felt unable to address this issue despite the fact that it has been highlighted as the major contributing factor to drug harms and deaths by all our speakers.”

Recommendation 18
100% support

We need to focus on preventing disadvantage to support hope and recovery in our communities.

People in our **most deprived areas are 15 times as likely to die** from a drug related death as those in the least deprived areas. (NRS 2024)



Thank you

elinor.dickie@phs.scot

