

Statement on behalf of Directors of Public Health

Response to release of the most recent set of statistics on drug-related deaths:

The figures released today show that in 2016 we saw the highest number of drug related deaths ever recorded (867 – a 23% increase on 2015). Much work continues to review and understand the circumstances of each death, and to examine ways of preventing future deaths.

What works to prevent such drug related deaths covers many matters. Early influences are important – a good education, free of adverse experiences, offers the best start in life. Early adulthood for people at risk is also a time where continuing support is important – support to take up skills, find and hold down a job, secure a decent income and a home, and form lasting relationships. If any of these key steps is a struggle, then optimism fades and risks rise and other problems feature – such as addiction or mental health problems. Preventing such circumstances is complex, but achievable and desirable against the risks of the alternative, as shown in these figures.

For people in need, there is sound knowledge about what works best to support them into services and especially at times of transition. Applying these lessons, everywhere and for as many people as possible, would save lives.

Dr Andrew Fraser, on behalf of Scottish Directors of Public Health, said:

“Whilst Scotland’s health record continues to improve, not everyone is enjoying that improvement equally. Vulnerable young men and women – those in their 30s to 50s – dying from drug-related causes remains high and continues to rise, year-on-year.

No-one makes the conscious, positive choice to become drug-dependent, and no-one would choose such a pathway if it meant they ended their life tragically and early. Drug related deaths mark lives cut short; all are the sons and daughters of parents, who are often still alive. Most statistics show that many of those who die a drug-related death are known to be fathers and mothers themselves. The cost to children puts a further generation at risk.

Bringing people the support they need, when they need it and for as long as they need it to get them through difficult times, is a crucial part of ensuring our service – public and voluntary – work to reduce drug related deaths. This is true for effective prevention and treatment, and spans all services that support people with drug problems.

We understand more and more about the circumstances of the lives of people who are drug-dependent, and that it is possible to prevent such deaths. It is a responsibility of us all to ensure we learn and apply the lessons from reports and reviews on the subject – they are numerous – so that we can prevent the tragedy of drug related deaths in Scotland.”

Ends.

Notes to editors:

The Annual Report of Drug –related deaths in Scotland was released by National Records Scotland (NRS) on August 15th. URL here <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/node/2911>.

There were 867 drug-related deaths in 2016, 161 (23%) more than in 2015. This is the highest number ever recorded, and was 446 (106%) more than in 2006, which was 421.

Dr Andrew Fraser is Chair of the Directors of Public Health in Scotland

For inquiries, contact 07500 854 574