

John Swinney MSP
First Minister
Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Via firstminister@gov.scot

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Dear First Minister

Drug deaths in Scotland

I write on behalf of the Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC) following the publication on 23 September 2026 of updated statistics from National Records Scotland (NRS), showing an 11% rise in deaths related to illicit drugs. Commission Members have noted with alarm that reporting of these statistics highlighted that Scotland continues to face the highest rate of drug deaths in Europe, despite persistent policy commitments to reverse this situation. We are also focused on the human cost and distress behind these statistics, and the impact on the people affected, their families and communities.

The SHRC [has been clear](#) that drug deaths are unacceptable and avoidable. While this is a persistent and complex issue, it is not an inevitability for Scotland.

Drug deaths are a human rights issue. Most clearly engaged are the right to the highest attainable standard of health under Article 12 of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and, in some circumstances, the right to life, an absolute right protected under Article 2 of the ECHR and under the Human Rights Act 1998. The [UN International Guidelines on Human Rights and Drug Policy](#) clearly set out the human rights framework to guide government policy making.

The SHRC recognises there are multiple and complex systemic factors that contribute to drug related death rates, noting the published data reinforces the clear link between drug deaths and deprivation and poverty. Our recent report on [Poverty and human rights in Scotland](#) highlights that poverty is both a cause and a consequence of human rights denials, further highlighting the role poverty and deprivation play in drugs related deaths.

We welcomed the Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health Sport, Alcohol and Drugs' recognition to Parliament of the severity of the issue and her commitment to further action. This commitment must translate into action which addresses the root causes as well as the symptoms of drug deaths. We would welcome an urgent update from the Scottish Government on how it is taking a rights-based approach to both designing its models of tackling the issue of drug deaths in Scotland and evaluating the impact of any such policy interventions on this issue.

I am copying this letter to the Conveners of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, the Health and Social Care Committee, and the Public Service Reform Committee.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Angela O'Hagan
Chair, Scottish Human Rights Commission

Cc: Helen McDade, Convenor, Health, Care and Sport Committee,
HCS.committee@parliament.scot

Katie Hagmann, Convenor, Equality, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee,
EHRCJ.committee@parliament.scot

Maree Todd, Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs;
MinisterforMWPHSAD@gov.scot