

Scottish Government urged to fund consumption rooms as Edinburgh drug deaths rise

Call for action after latest police figures show 118 suspected drug deaths in Edinburgh in 2023, a rise for the third year running

The Scottish Government is being pushed to provide the funding needed to pilot a safe drug consumption room in Edinburgh, after the number of suspected drug deaths across the capital rose for the third year running.

The latest [figures](#) showed there were 1197 suspected drug deaths in Scotland in 2023, a rise of 10 per cent from 2022. Across the regions, Edinburgh had the third highest number of suspected drug deaths (118) after Glasgow (303) and Lanarkshire (147).

A study on setting up a facility where people could take illegal substances has backed establishing a number of centres in city drug 'hotspots' to reduce the rate of fatal overdoses.

The research, commissioned by the council and [Edinburgh Alcohol and Drug Partnership](#) (EADP), said it would be a "key opportunity for harm reduction" and a "broad estimate" priced the service at between £1m and £2m a year.

Councillors agreed to progress proposals for a safe drug consumption facility (SDCF) at a meeting on Tuesday, March 12. The policy and sustainability committee called for further details on costs, potential locations and engagement with Lord

Advocate – who will need to approve the final plan and confirm prosecution of users would not be in the public interest.

However the funding needed for the scheme could not be met by funding from the city's cash-strapped health and social care partnership – which is funded jointly by the council and NHS – without significant impact on other core services," a report said.

EADP officials are now set to hold talks with "decision makers" at the Scottish Government to "explore funding opportunities".

At the meeting Pat Togher, the Chief Officer of the Health and Social Care Partnership, revealed that based on police figures there were 118 suspected drug deaths in Edinburgh in 2023, up from 113 in 2022 and 109 the previous year.

Councillor Finlay McFarlane, SNP, said his heart "sank" upon hearing the figures.

On opening a SDCF, he said: "If it stops people from dying then let's do it – that was what someone with living experience of addiction told me recently.

"We need a suite of services that can meet and protect people at different stages of their recovery journey.

"We also know from elsewhere that safe drug consumption facilities can be a gateway into other statutory services and support, and have wider community benefits such as a reduction in blood borne viruses.

"I also think it's right we make approaches to national government for assistance realising these services."

However Councillor Iain Whyte, Conservatives said he had concerns over the scheme.

He said: "Part of the issue in Scotland is people dying from overdoses who are already in contact with our drug services, so saying this is a hook to bring people in, it is not a panacea in the way some people think.

"There are also all sorts of legal and financial hurdles to overcome if this was to be the best way forward.

"When I listen to those involved in recovery like Favour UK, they say things about this where they are concerned this is putting the focus in the wrong direction.

"They also talk about the possibility that for some drug users, having a supposed safe place where they know there is recovery from overdose may encourage them to take further risk in terms of the amount of drugs they're taking. These are all concerns I think need to be reviewed and checked before we go on supporting fully drug consumption rooms, or supporting in part."

Mr Togher said: "These are services that attract people that are at the sharp end of drug misuse. Is it effectively an additional adjunct to the options that we have to provide, in my view, in relation to the wider issue that is drug misuse.

"The difference with this is that given all of the research and the multiple services which are literally in their hundreds – some people using them for example 300 times a day – services that are open, for example in safer drug consumption facilities 365 days a year, open to extended hours to suit the needs of individuals. In actual fact drug deaths within this are in single figures, we're talking one or two.

"So the ability to be able to respond quickly and provide a hook into services is a significant safety protective factor within this model. It shouldn't be underestimated – it's an extremely important mechanism in which to get people into the service and keep them in the service."

Council leader Cammy Day said: "Whilst there's still some legality to work through with government this is something which is absolutely essential and if it can also help save lives and allow us to invest money into other areas that's even more helpful."

by Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter



A safer drug consumption facility (SDCF) in Vancouver, Canada.
Image: City of Edinburgh Council/Stirling University.