

Midlothian Health chiefs say the 20 deaths recorded in 2023 is a ‘tragedy’

The number of people who died from drugs related deaths in Midlothian last year was five times higher than the previous year.

Health chiefs in Midlothian described the 20 deaths recorded in 2023 in the county as a ‘tragedy’ coming just 12 months after they reported the lowest number of deaths in over a decade.

A meeting of Midlothian Integration Joint Board, which oversees health and social care, heard from its chief officer Morag Barrow that they had an “exceptionally low year” in 2022 when just four drug deaths were recorded.

She said the latest figures from last year matched the average number which had been seen in other previous years.

But she told the meeting: “Every drugs death, indeed every death, is a tragedy and we extend our condolences to every family affected.”

Midlothian’s head of adult services Nick Clater reminded health chiefs that in July last year there were four deaths relating to a specific batch of drugs which had affected the county.

He said that, at the time, the outreach team had worked to identify and support vulnerable people in the communities

affected saying the death rate may have been even higher without their efforts.

Councillor Derek Milligan said he was baffled by the higher number of drugs deaths recorded across Scotland compared to England and Wales and questioned whether there was a difference in the way the statistics were being recorded.

Mr Clater told him: "That is the \$64million question."

Councillor Milligan said: "It is an absolute tragedy. When I think that this has been at the top of priorities for some time and we are still seeing these figures.

"I am perplexed by it because I travel all over the country in England and Wales and I can't get my head around the huge difference in the figures when I see areas there with the same issues and, in some cases, worse.

"Is there a huge difference in the number of people taking drugs in Scotland or is the information being collected differently?"

Ms Barrow told the board: "There is a question around what is being classed as a drugs death, for example we have seen people dying from long standing conditions who have a drugs issue or drugs related suicide."

Mr Clater said a detailed report would be presented to the next meeting of the board looking at the latest drugs death figures and responding to questions about how they are recorded.

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter