Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Background Quality Report

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Introduction – Context for the quality report
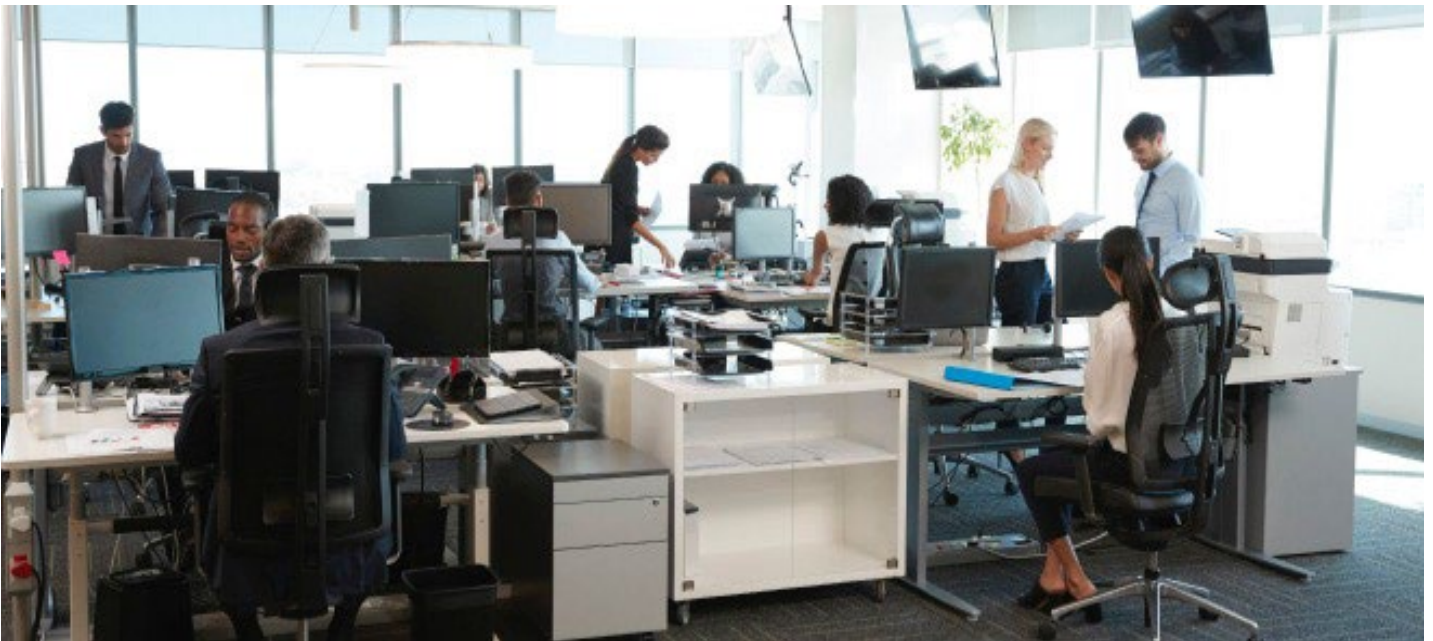
The 'Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service' publication is produced annually by the Human Resource Consultancy Services (HRCS) branch within the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) and has been done so since 2000/2001. The reports are available to download from the sickness absence page on the NISRA website and are published in line with the HRCS Customer Service and Engagement Statement.

Each publication provides analyses of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) and trend information over the last five years. Headline figures since 1999/2000 are also presented in the most recent report.

The 'Quarterly Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service' publication is published three times a year (February, September, November) by HRCS and was first published in December 2020. The reports are available to download from the sickness absence page on the NISRA website. Each publication provides analyses of sickness absence in the NICS over the last five quarters.

The statistics are produced using administrative data sourced from the Northern Ireland Civil Service's main HR systems. More detail can be found in the associated Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD) report and the User Guide.

The annual and quarterly reports are two separate publications which differ in the level of detail given. For the purposes of this background quality report, the annual report is referred to but note that the same level of quality assurance is applied to the quarterly report where applicable This document aims to provide users with an evidence-based assessment of the quality of the data underpinning the Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service report, by reporting against those of the nine European Statistical System (ESS) quality dimensions and principles appropriate to this output. For each dimension, this document describes how this applies to the publication.

1. **Relevance – the degree to which the statistical product meets user needs in both coverage and context.**
   This report covers sickness absences that were recorded on HRConnect (the main HR system used by the NICS) for industrial and non-industrial staff in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The report also includes sickness absence information for NICS staff in the Department of Justice that were not held on HRConnect, namely: the Northern Ireland Prison Service (data taken from their COMPASS system). Data prior to 2016/2017 for Youth Justice Agency staff was taken from their Simply Personnel HR system.

   Absence information is presented by Department, grade level, gender, age group, length of service and reason for absence. Some comparisons with figures for the last five financial years are also included as well as headline figures since 1999/2000.

Guidelines for the standardised calculation and reporting of sickness absence statistics were produced by the Cabinet Office in 2006 (see User Guide for more information) and these have been followed.

So as to avoid confusion, this report currently does not include the less-comparable statistic of Working Days Lost per Employee which is used by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in their reports, which are based on self-reported sample surveys.

User needs were identified through a Customer Survey in February 2021 and further information on the quality assurance information checks that we undertake can be found in our QAAD report and User Guide.

2. **Accuracy and Reliability - The proximity between an estimate and the unknown true value.**
These statistics are sourced from administrative systems that encompass all 22,500 NI civil servants. It is not a sample but a complete data set. All line managers are required to record their staff's absences on the systems, it is not optional.

Absences that are entered, or closed, on the HR systems retrospectively may be missed if the data were downloaded before this happened. To minimise the impact of this the data for all staff held on HRConnect and COMPASS are extracted around five weeks after the end of the financial year or quarterly reporting period; this allows for the updating of absence records and personnel moves.

There is no means of verifying if line managers have entered absences incorrectly, or not at all. Misdiagnosis of symptoms may lead to some self-certified absences being recorded under the wrong reasons. However, Departments regularly remind line managers and staff concerning their roles and responsibilities which are also detailed in Personal Performance Agreements. HRConnect also contains guidance in this regard.

As detailed in the QAAD report, numerous validation checks are carried out each month by a number of parties, including NISRA statisticians, to ensure the data is fit for purpose. In relation to potential sources of bias and error, further details can also be found in the QAAD report.

Any information provided relating to lost production (referred to as Direct Salary Cost from February 2023) is calculated, where possible, on the basis of each individual's actual salary and the associated employer's National Insurance and Superannuation contributions.

Users should note that some figures may not add to the totals due to rounding.

3. **Timeliness and Punctuality - Timeliness refers to the time gap between publication and the reference period. Punctuality refers to the gap between planned and actual publication dates.**

The annual datasets cover the financial year from 1st April to 31st March. The processes used in producing this report are continually being streamlined while at the same time maintaining or improving the accuracy of the data.

Table 1: Publication dates of annual reports from 2011/12 to 2021/22

Report Year	Publication Date
2021/22	28/06/2022
2020/21	29/06/2021
2019/20	25/06/2020
2018/19	20/06/2019
2017/18	26/09/2018
2016/17	20/09/2017
2015/16	22/09/2016
2014/15	10/09/2015
2013/14	16/10/2014
2012/13	30/10/2013
2011/12	29/11/2012

The report in 2011/2012 was delayed beyond October for reasons detailed in the respective Data Quality section.

The quarterly datasets cover the relevant quarter within the financial year. The 4th quarter (January – March) is not published, however, the data is analysed and can be obtained from the next publication.

Table 2: Publication dates of quarterly reports from 2020 to 2023

Quarterly Period	Publication Date
October 2022 – December 2022	28/02/2023
July 2022 – September 2022	29/09/2022
April 2022 – June 2022	06/09/2022
October 2021 – December 2021	15/03/2022
July 2021 – September 2021	14/12/2021
April 2021 – June 2021	23/09/2021
October 2020 – December 2020	25/03/2021
July 2020 – September 2020	17/12/2020

4. **Accessibility and Clarity - Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, also reflecting the format in which the data are available and the availability of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the metadata, illustrations and accompanying advice.**

Accessibility to the statistics for this publication are in line with those detailed in the HRCS Customer Service and Engagement Statement.

No issues relating to accessibility or clarity were received during a Customer Survey in February 2021 or March 2018.

The report contains contact details for further information and is available to download via the sickness absence page on the NISRA website and the DoF website along with the reports from previous years.

In 2013 the report was scrutinised as part of an internal NISRA peer review process, with generally very positive feedback.

The data presented in the report are also available in Microsoft Excel (.xlsx) format.

If the publication is required in a machine- readable format, the tables supplied in .xlsx format can be saved as .csv files by Microsoft Excel or by the free Apache OpenOffice suite

5. **Coherence and Comparability - Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different sources or methods, but refer to the same topic, are similar. Comparability is the degree to which data can be compared over time and domain.**

Analyses prior to 2008/2009 were based on data extracted from HRMS (the previous HR system used by the NICS). Sickness absence information was entered onto this system by Departmental HR staff based on manually completed weekly sick returns. Under the new system it is the responsibility of line managers to record sickness absence information on HRConnect. This change in recording practices coincided with an increase in the proportion of staff with no absences and should be taken into consideration when analysing historical trends.

The recording of the reason for absence changed in 2008/2009 from using the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) codes to the Sickness Absence Recording Tool (SART). Details regarding the SART classification can be found on the IOM website. These were developed by the Institute of Occupational Medicine (IOM) for the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Trend data relating to the reason for absence is therefore not available prior to 2008/2009.

Prior to 2010/2011 industrial staff were not included in the analyses, nor were staff in the Department of Justice or the Public Prosecution Service. Historic figures are therefore not directly comparable with analyses for 2010/2011 onwards.

In December 2016, HR information, including historic sickness absence information, relating to staff in the Youth Justice Agency was moved from their Simply Personnel HR system onto HRConnect (the main HR system used by the NICS). This should improve the data's

comparability further, from 2016/2017 onwards. Similarly, Non-Prison Grade staff in the Northern Ireland Prison Service have moved their HR information from the COMPASS system onto HRConnect from 1st April 2017.

The HRConnect, Simply Personnel and COMPASS databases used similar definitions and methodology to record sickness absence. As part of the data verification process the variables in the datasets are checked to ensure that they are comparable prior to the datasets being merged into one overall financial year file.

On the 9th May 2016 new Departmental structures came into effect within the NICS, with the number of Ministerial Departments being reduced from twelve to nine [Note: The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) is a Non-Ministerial Department], with various functional areas being transferred to accommodate this.

For the 2016/2017 Departmental analyses, data for the period 1st April 2016 to 8th May 2016 have been recoded to best reflect the new Departmental structures that came into effect on the 9th May 2016. In addition, in order to provide some comparative information, any Departmental analyses presented for 2015/2016 (since the 2016/2017 publication) have also been reworked to represent a best estimate of the position as if the restructuring had actually taken effect from 1st April 2015. Given staff moves/transfers and the normal ongoing restructuring that occurs within Departments it has not, however, been practical to attempt to estimate historical Departmental figures, based on the new NICS structure, prior to 2015/2016.

Between September 2015 and May 2016 almost 3,000 full-time and part-time staff left the NICS on a Voluntary Exit Scheme leading to some 2,100 less staff years of work being available in 2016/2017 than in 2015/2016.

HRCS became aware that certification data was being incorrectly recorded on HRConnect by a relatively small number of NICS line managers or staff. This meant that the certification data for around 2% of all sickness absence spells were mistakenly being reported as uncertified or missing. Through the use of related medical certificate data, also held on HRConnect, it was possible for 2017/2018 to improve the quality of the reported data and correctly identify these spells as being certified. This process has been retrospectively applied to NICS sickness absence data for 2013/2014 onwards and headline figures were presented in the Key Facts section of the 2017/2018 report.

As of the 4 November 2021, revised guidance was issued on how absence attributed to COVID-19 is recorded on HRConnect. Between 4 November 2021 and 17 July 2022, the first 10 calendar days of an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as paid special leave on HRConnect, and not as a sickness absence. Between 18 July 2022 and 9 October 2022, the first 5 calendar days of an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as paid special leave. From 10 October 2022, an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as sickness absence. Subsequently caution should be taken when reading trend information.

The self-certification period for sickness absence was temporarily extended from 7 days to 28 days for the period 17 December 2021 to 26 January 2022. This is adhering to Covid-19 guidance issued by the NICS and applied to all new absences during this period.

Where practical the Cabinet Office guidelines on the calculation of sickness absence are followed. The headline sickness absence figures can be compared to the GB Civil Service. However, in-depth comparisons cannot be made as they do not publish figures beyond their headline rate. The headline figures would achieve a grade D on the 4 Nations Comparability Scale given that they are produced from separate sources of data but the methods and standards are broadly comparable.

In Scotland the sickness absence statistics for the Scottish Government workforce are reported quarterly (on a rolling 12-month basis), along with explanatory notes. They are produced on a "per staff year" basis. The Welsh Government includes headline sickness absence figures in their annual Consolidated Accounts. They are produced on a "per staff year" basis also. In the Republic of Ireland (RoI), sick leave statistics for the Public Service are published annually. These are on a "per full-time equivalent" basis.

Care should also be taken when making comparisons with the sickness absence reports produced by CIPD or CBI, which are often quoted in the press. These are based on survey returns which can be affected by response bias. For example, firms with solid methods of data collection and that have 'good' figures to report may be the ones most likely to send in their figures. These organisations also report on a "per person" method while the NICS reports on a 'per Staff Year' basis, as per Cabinet Office guidelines, which methodologically tends to return a higher figure. In particular, using the 'per person' method can markedly underreport the absence levels of organisations with a high proportion of part-time staff and/or high levels of staff turnover.

The "per Staff Year" method takes account of the hours a member of staff actually works whereas the "per person" method uses the number of staff employed but disregards their working patterns. The Staff Year value is a better reflection of the real working time available because it takes into consideration both the contracted hours worked and the proportion of the year for which staff were employed. This enables more meaningful comparisons to be made with external organisations and between/within Departments.

Typically the number of Staff Years is less than the headcount of staff and therefore an organisation's Working Days Lost per Staff Year figure will tend to be higher than their Working Days Lost per Person figure. The magnitude of this difference will depend on the proportion of part-time staff and the level of staff turnover in the organisation. For example, in the GB Civil Service the difference has been estimated to be about one day.

6. **Trade-offs between Output Quality Components - Trade-offs are the extent to which different aspects of quality are balanced against each other.**
   No trade-offs applied.

7. **Assessment of User Needs and Perceptions - The processes for finding out about users and uses, and their views on the statistical products.**
   The HRCS Customer Service and Engagement Statement details HRCS's customer engagement policy.

   An online customer survey was undertaken in February 2021. The most frequently stated reason for using the sickness absence publication was performance monitoring followed by policy making/policy monitoring.

   The majority (79%) of respondents said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the publication overall. Most of the respondents (86%) said that the statistics fully or mostly met their needs; the remainder said that their needs where partly meet. Suggestions for how needs could be better met and HRCS responses to all feedback are documented in Appendix 2 of the customer survey.

   A user consultation undertaken in February 2015, and an internal peer review in 2013, both received positive feedback on the annual publication.

   Feedback obtained from key users of the quarterly sickness absence publications in December 2020 aided content development.

   Regular meetings also take place with key users within the NICS.

8. **Performance, Cost and Respondent Burden - The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the statistical output.**
   There is no respondent burden since the data are held on administrative systems and extracted using an automated process. The annual operational cost (staff time) of producing the report is approximately £26,000.

   The operational cost (staff time) of producing the three quarterly reports is in total approximately £20,000.

9. **Confidentiality, Transparency and Security - The procedures and policy used to ensure sound confidentiality, security and transparent practices.**
   The HRCS Confidentiality and Protection Arrangements statement sets out HRCS's arrangement for maintaining the confidentiality of the statistical data used in this publication.

   All staff involved are trained on the protocols for protecting and maintaining the confidentiality of the data. NISRA follows the 'National Statistician's Guidance: Confidentiality of Official Statistics' in the collection and dissemination of this report.

   Data are held on a network that is only accessible to the few statisticians who need access. Printouts containing individual records or small cell sizes are locked away and shredded as soon as possible.

Standard disclosure control methodology is applied to the data. This ensures that information attributable to an individual is not identifiable in any published outputs and that the outputs are only seen by authorised staff prior to their publication.

Suppression is applied where the number of individuals in a cell is less than three. Suppression is also applied, where necessary, to the next lowest valued cell in order that identification by subtraction is not possible.

The [pre-release access list](#) for the report is reviewed on a quarterly/annual basis. The named individuals are checked to ensure that they are the correct contact and that they are available on the day before the release of the report (if they are not then they can nominate a deputy). A guidance document is also sent to those on the revised list explaining to them their obligations about data disclosure prior to the publication of the report.