

**QUARTERLY SICKNESS ABSENCE IN THE NORTHERN
IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE
July 2021 - September 2021**



**Published
14 December 2021**

CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. Executive Summary	1
Key Facts	2
2. Introduction	3
3. Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence	4
Department	5
Grade Level	6
Gender	7
Age Group	8
4. Reasons for Sickness Absence	9
Working Days Lost	9
Spells of Absence	10
Appendix 1 - Definitions	11
Appendix 2 - Calculations	12
Appendix 3 - Departmental Analysis	13
Appendix 4 - Abbreviations	14
Appendix 5 - National Statistics	15

All media enquiries should be directed to DoF Press Office

Telephone: 028 9081 6724 or 028 9081 6895

Further statistical information can be obtained from:

Eimear McKee

NISRA Human Resource Consultancy Services

Colby House

Belfast, BT9 5RR

Telephone: 028 9038 8441

Email: Eimear.Mckee@nisra.gov.uk

To download any of the tables found in this report in ODS format, visit the [Sickness absence page](#) on the NISRA website.

If you require this publication in a machine- readable format, the tables supplied in Open Document Spreadsheet format can be saved as .csv files by Microsoft Excel or by the free [Apache OpenOffice suite](#).

Please note all figures contained within this report are obtained from the HRCS Sickness Absence database.

1

Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of all sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service between 1st July 2021 and 30th September 2021, as well as trend information for the previous four quarters. The main findings are found below.

1) **Headline Figures**

The headline figure for the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter was 3.1 days (average days lost per staff year equivalent), an increase from 2.8 days in the previous quarter. This absence level is higher than the level experienced during the same quarter in 2020 (2.2 days).

The 3.1 days lost per staff year represented 6.0% of the available working days in the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter, an increase on the 5.0% days lost in the previous quarter. In salary terms, this equated to an estimated £9.7 million of lost production. This is an increase on the cost of lost production in the previous quarter (£8.6 million) and the corresponding quarter in 2020 (£5.9 million).

During the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter 84.5% of staff had no absence, a decrease from the previous quarter. The average number of spells per staff year equivalent was 0.2 spells which is equal to the previous quarter.

2) **Key Variable Trends**

The level of absence within departments varied from 1.8 days for the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to 4.7 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ). All departments, aside from The Executive Office (TEO) experienced a rise in absence levels compared to the previous quarter and compared to the corresponding quarter in the previous year. The increase in absence in the Department for Communities (DfC), over the quarter, had the greatest impact on the 0.3 day increase in the overall absence level for the NICS.

The absence level for females (3.4 days) remained higher than that for males (2.9 days) with over a quarter of this difference being due to pregnancy related disorders.

3) **Reasons for Absence**

Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses was the absence reason that accounted for the greatest proportion of working days lost (40.0%) during the quarter. Within this category, work-related stress accounted for 35.8% of the days lost while non work-related stress accounted for 32.5%. COVID-19 accounted for 0.44 working days lost per staff year equivalent in the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter which was the equivalent of 14.0% of all NICS sickness absence days. This is an increase on the previous quarter in which COVID-19 accounted for 0.20 working days lost; the equivalent of 7.1% of all sickness absence days in that period.

1

Executive Summary: Key Facts

The Table below displays trend information for some key measures of sickness absence in the NICS over the last five quarters.

Key Facts	Jul20- Sep20	Oct20- Dec20	Jan21- Mar21	Apr21- Jun21	Jul21- Sep21
Proportion of Staff with No Recorded Spells of Absence (%)	90.2	87.2	86.7	86.3	84.5
Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent¹	2.2	2.7	2.9	2.8	3.1
Percentage of Available Working Days² Lost (%)	4.0	4.9	5.1	5.0	6.0
Total Number of Working Days Lost	44,608	56,472	61,392	60,167	68,168
Estimated Lost Production³ (£ Million)	5.9	7.8	8.4	8.6	9.7
Average Number of Spells per Staff Year Equivalent	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2

¹ One Staff Year Equivalent refers to one full-time employee having been in post for the entire analysis period. See Appendix 2 for more information on this calculation.

² Available Working Days refers to any day on which an employee was expected to be at work. See Appendix 1 for more information.

³ Any information provided in this report that relates to lost production is calculated, where possible, on the basis of each individual's actual salary and the associated employer's National Insurance and Superannuation contributions.

2

Introduction

Context

The Northern Ireland Civil Service's sickness absence statistics have been collated and reported by the Human Resource Consultancy Services (HRCS) branch within the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) since 1999/2000. This is the fourth quarterly publication of sickness absence statistics. HRCS also publish statistics on a financial year basis with the report issued in June each year.

About this Report

This quarterly report provides a comprehensive analysis of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter as well as analyses over the previous four quarters.

National Statistics

National Statistics status means that our statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value, and it is our responsibility to maintain compliance with these standards.

These quarterly statistics were first published in December 2020 as Experimental Statistics. User feedback was gathered in relation to this publication, alongside the March and September 2021 publications. Using this feedback in combination with an Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) assessment, it was agreed to publish as National Statistics.

This quarterly report is additional and complementary to the annual (financial year) absence statistics published in June each year which were designated as National Statistics by [OSR](#) in 2019. The same methods and processes are used to produce this report, applied to a quarterly rather than an annual dataset.

Feedback is welcome and will be utilised to improve the value of the statistics in line with user requirements; any comments should be sent to hrcsabsence@finance-ni.gov.uk.

3

Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence

About this Chapter

Absence levels vary by department, grade level, gender and age group. This chapter contains a look at trends across these variables over the last five quarters.

Absence levels are presented in "Working days lost per staff year equivalent" format as recommended by the Cabinet Office in the review "Managing Attendance in the Public Sector (1998)". For an explanation and a worked example of how this method is applied please see Appendix 2.

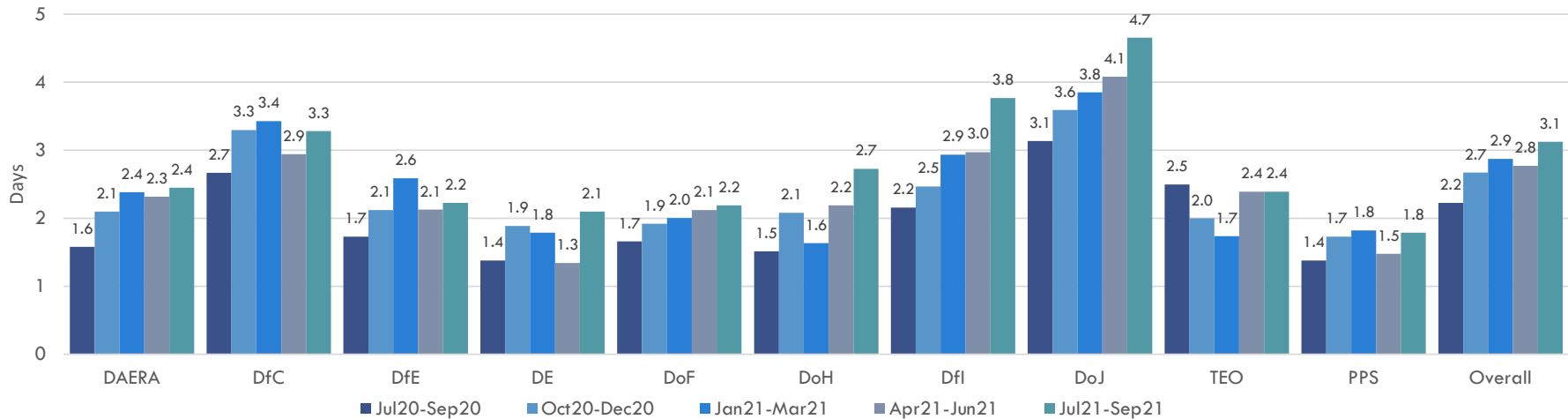
Staff in the NICS lost an average of 3.1 days to sickness absence in the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter - an increase from the previous quarter when staff lost 2.8 days and an increase from the corresponding quarter in the previous year (2.2 days).

All three main measures of sickness absence - working days lost per staff year, the percentage of available working days lost and estimated lost production - saw an increase when compared to the previous quarter.



3 Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Department

Figure 1: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Department¹: July 2020 to September 2021²



When assessing the variation in working days lost per staff year in Figure 1, it should be noted that staff numbers and characteristics vary per department which can influence absence levels. To view the most recent published departmental staff numbers, please visit the [2021 Personnel Report](#).

The average number of working days lost in the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter ranged from 1.8 days for the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to 4.7 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ). All departments, aside from The Executive Office (TEO), experienced a rise in absence levels compared to the previous quarter and compared to the corresponding quarter in the previous year.

The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) saw the largest increase in absence levels compared to the previous quarter; an increase of 0.8 days. As DfI contains 13.2% of all NICS staff, this increase had the second largest impact on the overall NICS absence level, contributing 28.4% to the 0.3 day rise. The Department for Communities (DfC), containing 29.4% of NICS staff, had the greatest impact on the overall increase, contributing 31.8% of the 0.3 day rise.

The Department of Education (DE), DoJ and the Department of Health (DoH) also experienced notable increases in comparison to the previous quarter.

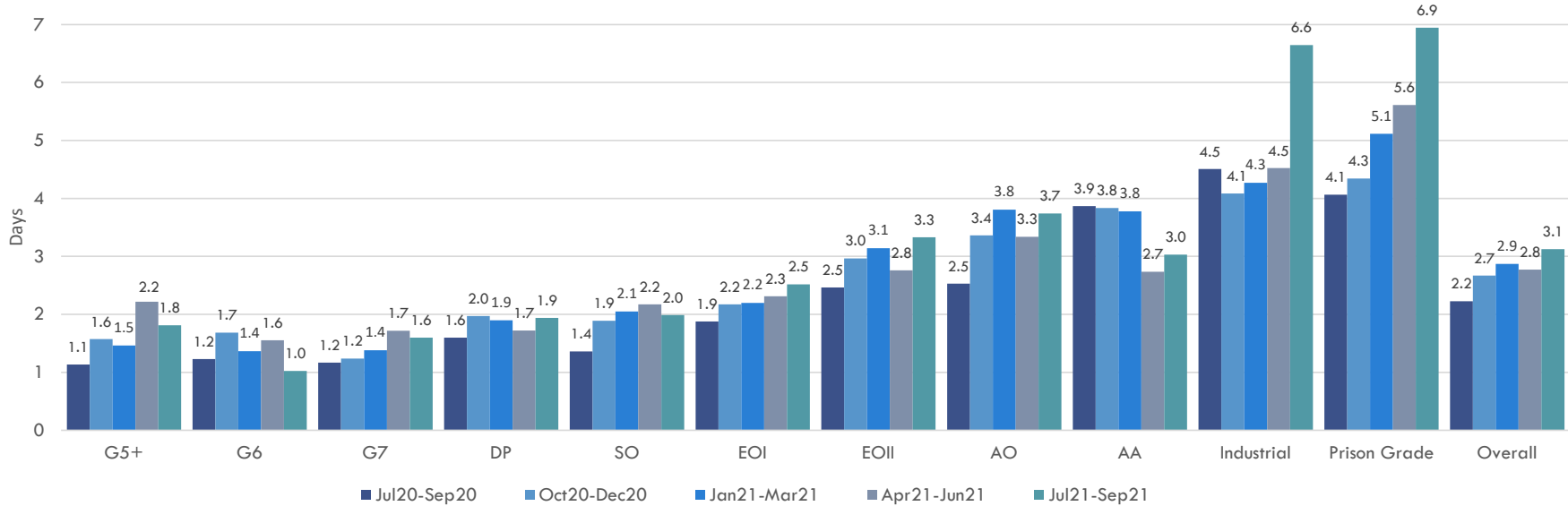
¹ A full list of Departmental abbreviations can be found in Appendix 4.

² While display figures were rounded to one decimal place, unrounded figures were used to calculate the bar heights in this chart.

3

Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Grade Level

Figure 2: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Analogous Grade Level¹: July 2020 to September 2021²



In Figure 2, non-industrial staff are separated into analogous grade levels, while Industrial and Prison Grade staff are reported separately.

Departmental staffing profiles can have an influence on relative absence levels. See Appendix 3 for a departmental breakdown of working days lost by grade group.

There is notable variation in absence levels across grade levels, although a general trend of decreasing levels of absence as grade level increases can be observed (with G5+ being the highest grade level).

The average number of working days lost in the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter for analogous grade levels ranged from 1.0 days for staff at Grade 6 level to 3.7 days for AO staff. Prison Grade staff lost the highest number of working days (6.9 days) followed by Industrial staff (6.6 days).

The majority of analogous grade levels reported increased absence levels compared with the previous quarter, with EOII level staff experiencing the largest increase in days lost. As EOII grade level comprises 18.0% of NICS staff, this increase had the greatest impact on the overall absence level.

Industrial and Prison Grade staff also saw sizeable increases in absence level; despite containing just 3.6% and 6.1% of NICS staff respectively, together they contributed over 40% to the 0.3 day rise in NICS absence level.

¹ A full list of Analogous Grade abbreviations can be found in Appendix 4.

² While display figures were rounded to one decimal place, unrounded figures were used to calculate the bar heights in this chart.

3

Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Gender

Figure 3: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Gender: July 2020 to September 2021¹

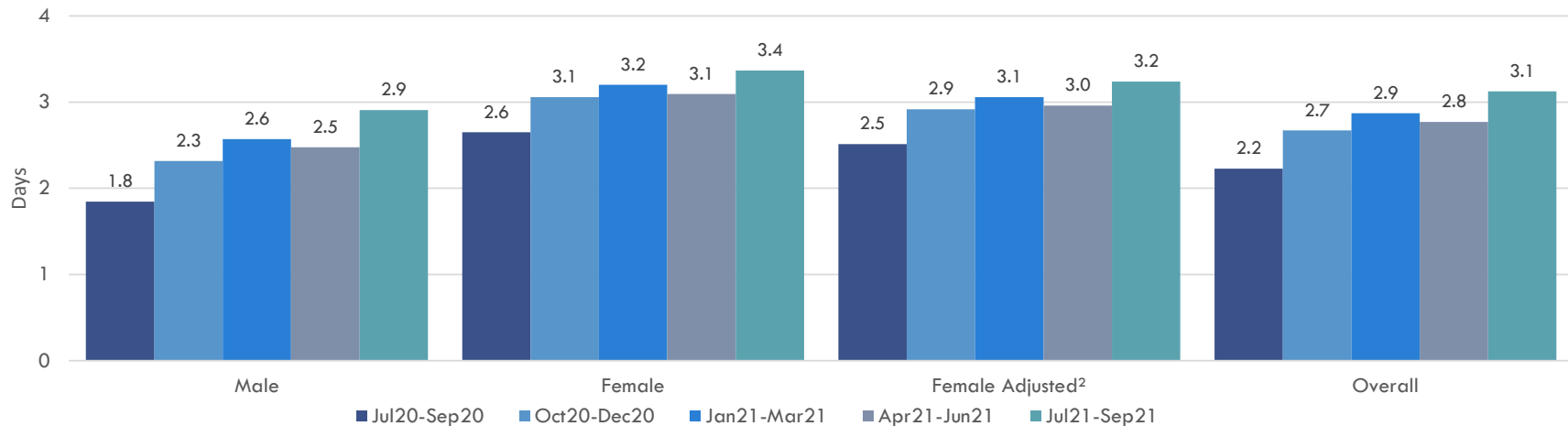


Figure 3 shows both males and females experienced an increase in absence level in the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter compared to the previous quarter and the corresponding quarter in 2020.

Female staff have historically had a higher level of absence than males as shown in the previous quarters. In the July 2021 - September 2021 period this difference was 0.5 days, a slight reduction to the gap in the previous quarter. However there are other factors to take into account when comparing the difference between genders.

If Pregnancy Related Disorders are excluded, the adjusted absence level for females fell from 3.4 days to 3.2 days. If all gender-specific absences³ were excluded from the absence figures the difference between male and female absence would fall to 0.2 days (3.1 days for females and 2.9 days for males).

The increase in male absence had the greater impact on the 0.3 day increase in NICS absence, accounting for 66.9% of the rise.

¹ While display figures were rounded to one decimal place, unrounded figures were used to calculate the bar heights in this chart.

² Excludes absences due to *Pregnancy Related Disorders*.

³ Absences due to *Pregnancy Related Disorders*, gender-specific *Genitourinary and Gynaecological Disorders* and gender-specific *Benign and Malignant Tumours, Cancers*.

3 Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Age Group

Figure 4: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Age Group: July 2020 to September 2021¹

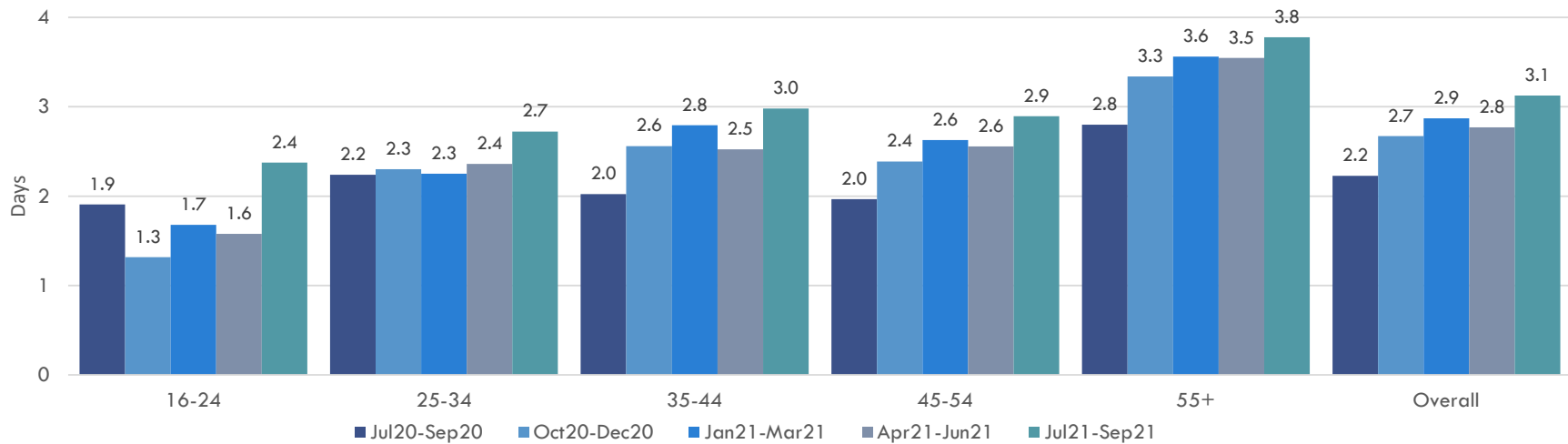


Figure 4 shows the average number of working days lost ranged from 2.4 days for staff aged 16-24 to 3.8 days for staff aged 55+.

All age groups saw increased absence levels compared to the previous quarter and the corresponding quarter in 2020.

Staff in the 16-24 age group experienced the largest increase in days lost per staff year. However, as this age group contains just 1.5% of all NICS staff, this increase had a minimal impact on the 0.3 day rise in NICS absence levels. The largest contributor to this rise was the 35-44 age group, which comprises 30.0% of NICS staff and accounted for 35.7% of the increase.

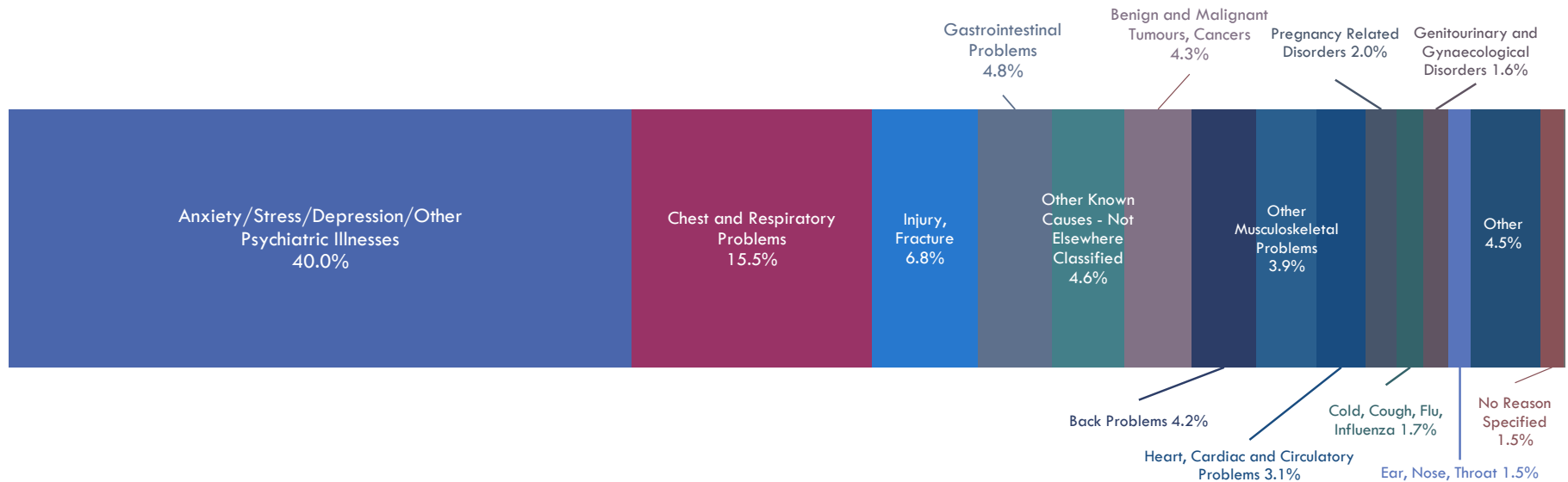
¹ While display figures were rounded to one decimal place, unrounded figures were used to calculate the bar heights in this chart.

4

Reasons for Sickness Absence: Working Days Lost

This chapter looks at the reasons for sickness absence during the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter.

Figure 5: Percentage of Working Days Lost by Reason: July 2021 to September 2021^{1,2,3}



Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses remains the reason behind the largest proportion of working days lost. Figure 5 shows this reason accounted for 40.0% of the total 3.1 working days lost in the quarter. Work-related stress was responsible for 35.8% of the working days lost in this illness category, while 32.5% were recorded as non work-related stress.

Absences due to COVID-19 were recorded under the Chest and Respiratory Problems category which accounted for 15.5% of all working days lost in the quarter.

COVID-19 represented 90.3% of all days lost to Chest and Respiratory and accounted for 14.0% (0.44 days) of all sickness absence days for the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter. In comparison, in the previous quarter, COVID-19 accounted for 7.1% (0.20 days) of all NICS sickness absence days.

The increase of absences recorded under Chest and Respiratory Problems had the biggest impact on the 0.3 day increase in absence from the previous quarter, contributing 70.0% to this rise. The increase in absences recorded under Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other had the second biggest impact, accounting for 21.0% of the 0.3 day rise.

¹ The category 'Other' contains any absence with a reason that accounted for less than 1% of the working days lost.

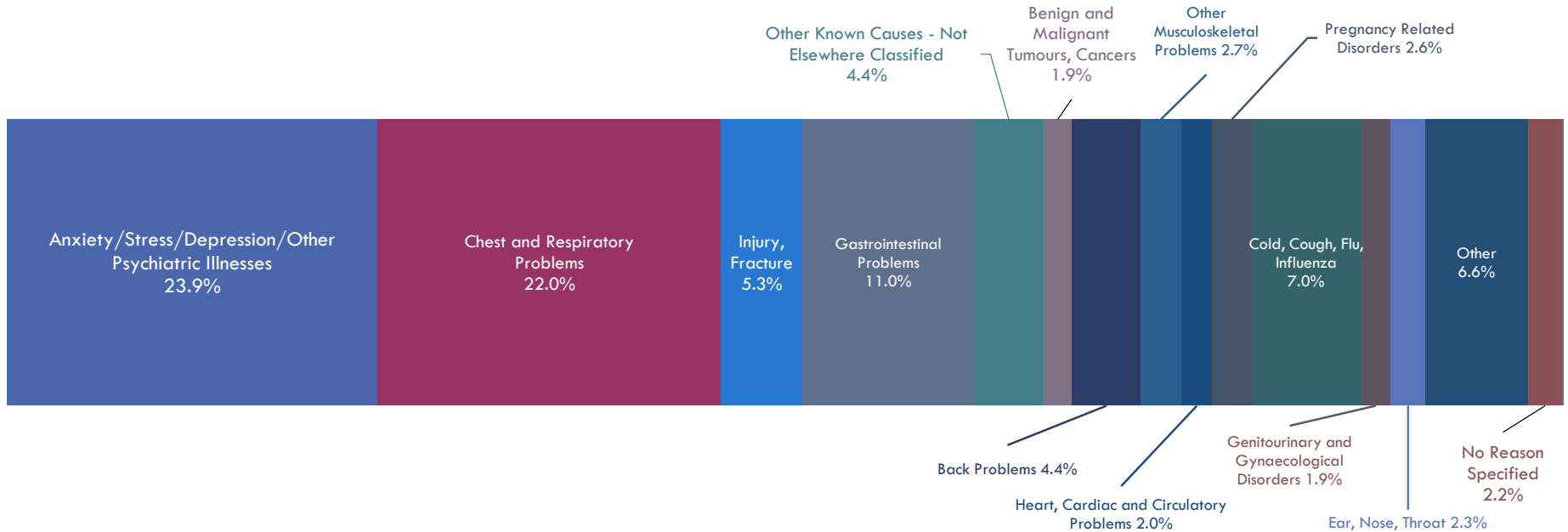
² The category 'No Reason Specified' contains any absence for which the reason was 'Not Specified', 'Awaiting Reason' or missing.

³ Comparison data for the previous four quarters can be found in the corresponding ODS tables.

4

Reasons for Sickness Absence: Spells of Absence

Figure 6: Percentage of Sickness Absence Spells by Reason: July 2021 to September 2021^{1,2,3}



The average number of sickness absence spells in the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter was 0.2 spells per staff year, which is equivalent to the previous quarter. Figure 6 shows absences due to Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses were responsible for the greatest number of absence spells (23.9%) in the quarter.

Absences due to Chest and Respiratory Problems were responsible for 22.0% of absence spells, a rise from the previous quarter in which they accounted for 9.1% of all absence spells.

Absences due to Gastrointestinal Problems and Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza were responsible for a combined 18.0% of absence spells in this quarter but since these illnesses tend to be short-term in nature they were only responsible for 6.5% of days lost in the period (as shown in Figure 5).

¹ The category 'Other' contains any absence with a reason that accounted for less than 1% of the working days lost.

² The category 'No Reason Specified' contains any absence for which the reason was 'Not Specified', 'Awaiting Reason' or missing.

³ Comparison data for the previous four quarters can be found in the corresponding ODS tables.

Appendix 1 - Definitions

Term	Definition
Staff Year Equivalent	One Staff Year Equivalent equates to one member of staff having been available for the entire period being analysed. This differs from their full time equivalent (fte) as the sye takes account of staff that have left/joined and therefore have not been available for the entire analysis period.
Available Working Days	Any day on which a member of staff would have been expected to attend work. Annual, Maternity and Term Time leave is excluded from the total. Leaving, joining and full-time equivalent value are taken into account.
Working Days Lost	Any day on which a member of staff would have been expected to attend work but were absent due to sickness. Maternity leave is excluded from the total. Leaving, joining and full-time equivalent are taken into account.
Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent	The number of working days lost divided by the number of staff year equivalents.
Percentage of Available Working Days Lost (%)	The percentage of available working days that are lost due to sickness absence. The Female Adjusted Absence Rate excludes absences that were recorded as Pregnancy Related Disorders. $(\text{Number of Working Days Lost} / \text{Number of Available Working Days}) \times 100$
Spells	A spell is any occasion of sickness absence with a defined onset and termination. An individual may have multiple spells of sickness absence within an analysed time period. It is important to note the distinction between working days lost and spells. For instance, if one employee has one spell of absence lasting six days and another employee has three spells of absence each lasting two days, both employees have lost six days to sickness absence with differing spells.
Estimated Lost Production (£)	This is calculated by multiplying the number of working days lost by each individual's daily cost. Each individual's annual salary (or if not available the grade level average annual salary) is converted to a daily rate by dividing by the 261 week days in a year. Provision is then made for periods of sickness at half pay, pension rate of pay and no pay. The appropriate Employer's National Insurance and Superannuation costs are also included in each individual's daily cost figure.

Appendix 2 - Calculations

Absence levels are presented in a number of ways throughout the report and are defined as follows:

$$\text{\% of Available Working Days Lost} = \frac{\text{Number of Working Days Lost}}{\text{Number of Available Working Days}} \times 100$$

$$\text{Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent} = \frac{\text{Number of Working Days Lost}}{\text{Number of Staff Year Equivalents}}$$

$$\text{Spells per Staff Year Equivalent} = \frac{\text{Number of Spells}}{\text{Number of Staff Year Equivalents}}$$

The "Working days lost per staff year equivalent" approach was recommended by the Cabinet Office in the review "Managing Attendance in the Public Sector (1998)". This approach replaced 'working days lost per person' which does not always permit valid comparisons to be made between or within organisations that differ in their proportions of part-time staff and/or their levels of staff turnover. In particular, it can misrepresent the absence rate in organisations that have a high proportion of part-time staff and/or high levels of staff turnover. For this quarter, a staff year equivalent (SYE) is approximately 61 working days for the majority of staff, but clearly this depends on date of entry and/or date of leaving, and annual leave entitlement which varies by grade, length of service, and work pattern. For each individual a 'staff year equivalent' was therefore calculated taking all of these factors into account. The following simple example highlights the rationale for the methodology used by the Cabinet Office.

Example

- A. Worked full-time for the whole quarter (hence 1 SYE)
- B. Worked full-time for 1 month in the quarter (hence $\frac{1}{3}$ SYE)

If **A** was absent for 20 working days and **B** was absent for 10 working days, then the number of working days lost per staff year equivalent are calculated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Total Number of working days lost} &= 30 \\ \text{Total Number of Staff Year Equivalents} &= 1 + 0.3 = 1.3 \end{aligned}$$

$$\text{Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent} = \frac{30}{1.3} = 23.1$$

According to the other approach, the number of days lost per person would be

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Total Number of working days lost} &= 30 \\ \text{Total Number of People} &= 2 \end{aligned}$$

$$\text{Working Days Lost per Person} = \frac{30}{2} = 15$$

which overlooks the fact that one of the staff was only employed for a single month.

Appendix 3: Departmental Analysis: Industrial, Non-Industrial and Prison Grade¹

Department	Working Days Lost per SYE Jul20-Sep20	Working Days Lost per SYE Oct20-Dec20	Working Days Lost per SYE Jan21-Mar21	Working Days Lost per SYE Apr21-Jun21	Working Days Lost per SYE Jul21-Sep21
DAERA	1.6	2.1	2.4	2.3	2.4
DAERA Industrial	2.3	3.6	3.7	4.1	4.1
DAERA Non-Industrial	1.5	2.0	2.3	2.2	2.3
DfC	2.7	3.3	3.4	2.9	3.3
DfC Industrial	1.0	1.6	0.6	4.4	7.0
DfC Non-Industrial	2.7	3.3	3.4	2.9	3.3
DfE	1.7	2.1	2.6	2.1	2.2
DE	1.4	1.9	1.8	1.3	2.1
DoF	1.7	1.9	2.0	2.1	2.2
DoF Industrial	3.2	0.5	7.0	0.0	10.3
DoF Non-Industrial	1.7	1.9	2.0	2.1	2.2
DoH	1.5	2.1	1.6	2.2	2.7
Dfl	2.2	2.5	2.9	3.0	3.8
Dfl Industrial	5.3	4.3	4.5	4.7	7.5
Dfl Non-Industrial	1.4	2.0	2.6	2.6	2.9
DoJ	3.1	3.6	3.8	4.1	4.7
DoJ Industrial	8.3	6.5	7.1	6.3	6.2
DoJ Non-Industrial	2.4	3.0	2.9	2.9	3.0
DoJ Prison Grade	4.1	4.3	5.1	5.6	6.9
TEO	2.5	2.0	1.7	2.4	2.4
PPS	1.4	1.7	1.8	1.5	1.8
NICS	2.2	2.7	2.9	2.8	3.1
NICS Industrial	4.5	4.1	4.3	4.5	6.6
NICS Non-Industrial	2.0	2.5	2.7	2.5	2.7
NICS Prison Grade	4.1	4.3	5.1	5.6	6.9

¹ It should be noted that staff numbers vary per department and grade which can influence absence levels. To view the most recent published departmental breakdown of staff numbers by grade level, please visit [2021 Personnel Report](#).

Appendix 4 - Abbreviations

Department Abbreviation	Full Department Name
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
DE	Department of Education
DfC	Department for Communities
DfE	Department for the Economy
DfI	Department for Infrastructure
DoF	Department of Finance
DoH	Department of Health
DoJ	Department of Justice
PPS	Public Prosecution Service
TEO	The Executive Office

Grade Abbreviation	Analogous Grade
G5+	Grade 5 and above
G6	Grade 6
G7	Grade 7
DP	Deputy Principal
SO	Staff Officer
EOI	Executive Officer I
EOII	Executive Officer II
AO	Administrative Officer
AA	Administrative Assistant

Appendix 5 - National Statistics

This report provides analysis of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the July 2021 - September 2021 quarter as well as analyses over the previous four quarters.

Human Resource Consultancy Services (HRCS) received user feedback indicating the need for these absence statistics to be published on a quarterly basis. Based on this feedback, HRCS liaised with users to develop a new quarterly publication. This quarterly report was first published as Experimental Statistics in December 2020, followed by two more experimental publications in March 2021 and September 2021. Publishing as Experimental Statistics encouraged user feedback and provided an opportunity for HRCS to assess whether the value of these quarterly statistics could be improved and whether they met user needs.

This assessment has now been completed and the feedback indicates that these quarterly statistics meet user needs. As these statistics use the same methods and sources as the annual statistics, the Office for Statistics Regulation has confirmed that they should be published as National Statistics under [Assessment Report 342](#).

Further information on the quality of the statistics published in this report can be found in the [Background Quality Report](#) and in the [Quality Assurance of Administrative Data \(QAAD\) Report](#).

HRCS welcomes ongoing feedback from users on whether they find this quarterly report to be helpful. Please email hrcsabsence@finance-ni.gov.uk regarding whether there is a particular area of interest not covered.