

SICKNESS ABSENCE IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE 2023/24

An overview of Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) for the financial year

Published by: Workforce Statistics & Analysis, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Theme: Government

Contact: Eimear McKee

Coverage: Northern Ireland

Email: Workforcestatisticsandanalysis@finance-ni.gov.uk

Frequency: Annual

Publication Date: 10 September 2024

Executive Summary

- The headline absence figure for 2023/2024 was 13.8 days (average days lost per staff year), an increase from 12.3 days in the previous year.
- The 13.8 days lost per staff year represented 6.3% of the available working days in 2023/2024, an increase on the 5.7% days lost in 2022/2023. In salary terms, this equated to an estimated £44.0 million in direct salary cost - equivalent to 4.0% of the total NICS pay bill in 2023/2024. This is an increase of £5 million on estimated direct salary cost in the previous year.
- 56.9% of staff had no recorded sick absence in 2023/2024 - a decrease from 57.8% in 2022/2023.
- The level of absence within Departments varied from 9.5 days for the Department of Health (DoH) to 18.7 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ), with the majority of Departments recording higher absence levels compared to 2022/2023.
- The absence level for females (14.8 days) remained higher than that for males (12.9 days) with just less than one third of this difference being due to gender-specific conditions¹.
- Staff who had been in post for under two years had a much lower level of sickness absence (8.5 days) than staff who had been employed for two years or more (14.3 days).
- More than one in every seven staff (14.0%) had at least one spell of long-term absence - these spells lasted around three months on average. This accounted for over three quarters (82.6%) of all working days
- Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses was the absence reason that accounted for the greatest proportion of working days lost (43.0%) during 2023/2024. Within this category, work-related stress accounted for 32.8% of the days lost.
- COVID-19 (Coronavirus) accounted for 0.35 working days lost per staff year in 2023/2024, which was the equivalent of 2.6% of all sickness absence days in the NICS for the period.²

¹ Absences due to Pregnancy Related Disorders, gender-specific Genitourinary and Gynaecological Disorders and gender-specific Benign and Malignant Tumours, Cancers.

² 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, this was reduced to the first 5 calendar days. From 10 October 2022, an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as sickness absence. Subsequently caution should be taken when reading trend information.

KEY FACTS

Key Facts ¹	2019/ 2020	2020/ 2021	2021/ 2022	2022/ 2023	2023/ 2024
Proportion of Staff with No Recorded Spells of Absence (%)	50.7	72.3	62.0	57.8	56.9
Working Days Lost per Staff Year	12.9	9.8	12.2	12.3	13.8
Percentage of Available Working Days Lost (%)	5.9	4.4	5.6	5.7	6.3
Total Number of Working Days Lost	272,797	207,160	269,839	278,105	308,602
Estimated Direct Salary Cost ² (£ Million)	36.6	28.4	38.6	39.0	44.0
Average Number of Spells per Staff Year	0.8	0.4	0.6	0.7	0.7
Proportion of Working Days Lost by Certification: Certified (%)	87.6	90.9	89.9	88.9	90.8
Proportion of Working Days Lost by Certification: Self-Certified (%)	10.1	4.7	6.9	8.9	7.5
Proportion of Working Days Lost by Certification: Uncertified/Missing (%)	2.3	4.4	3.1	2.3	1.7
Long-term Absence: Proportion of Working Days Lost due to Long-term Absence (%)	77.0	83.9	80.5	79.5	82.6
Long-term Absence: Frequency Rate ³ (%)	14.0	11.4	13.4	13.1	14.7
Long-term Absence: Average Duration (Working Days)	62.8	64.0	64.3	66.0	68.9
Short-term Absence: Average Number of Spells per Staff Year	0.64	0.26	0.44	0.52	0.49

¹ 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, this was reduced to the first 5 calendar days. From 10 October 2022, an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as sickness absence. Subsequently caution should be taken when reading trend information.

² Any information provided in this report that relates to direct salary cost is calculated, where possible, on the basis of each individual's actual salary and the associated employer's National Insurance and Superannuation contributions. Estimated Direct Salary Cost does not take into account the 2023 pay award implemented in June 2024.

³ Frequency Rate is the average number of long-term spells per employee, expressed as a percentage.
(No. of spells of long-term absence in the period/No. of employees) x 100

CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
Executive Summary	
Key Facts	
1. Working Days Lost through Sickness Absence	2
Introduction	3
Department	4
Grade Level	5
Sex	6
Length of Service	7
Age Group	8
Comparison with other Organisations	9
2. Spells of Sickness Absence	11
Number of Absence Spells	12
Combined Working Days Lost	12
Duration of Absence Spells Absence	13
Certification	14
3. Reason for Sickness Absence	15
NICS Overall	16
Grade Level	18
Sex	19
Age Group	20
Sickness Absence due to	
Covid-19 (Coronavirus)	21
4. Long-term Sickness Absence	22
Prevalence of Long-term Absence	23
Grade Level	24
Sex	24
Age Group	25
Reason for Long-term Absence Long-term Frequency	25
Long-term Duration	26
5. Absence Insight	27
Appendices	32
1. Calculations	33
2. Links to other Organisations Sickness Absence Statistics	34
3. List of Abbreviations	35
4: Business Area Analysis	36

All media enquiries should be directed to the DoF Press Office Telephone: 028 9081 6724 or email dof.pressoffice@finance-ni.gov.uk.

Further information can be obtained from:
Eimear McKee
Workforce Statistics & Analysis
Bruce Street
Belfast, BT2 7JD

Telephone: 028 90 38 8441

Email: Workforcestatisticsandanalysis@finance-ni.gov.uk

To download any of the tables found in this report in Microsoft Excel (.xlsx) format, visit the Sickness absence page on the NISRA website.

If you require this publication 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.

Accredited Official Statistics

Our statistical practice is regulated by the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR). OSR sets the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value in the [Code of Practice](#) for Statistics that all producers of official statistics should adhere to. You are welcome to contact us directly with any comments about how we meet these standards. Alternatively, you can contact OSR by emailing regulation@statistics.gov.uk or via the OSR website.

These accredited official statistics are produced in compliance with the Code of Practice for Statistics. Our Statistics Charter provides further details of how we apply the principles and practices of the Code in the production and publication of our official statistics. Areas that we are working to improve are included in the [Background Quality Report](#).

Please note all figures contained within this report are obtained from the WSA Financial Sickness Absence database (excludes 2023 pay award).

User Feedback

We are constantly trying to improve our service and would like to hear your feedback on how we are doing. [If you have time please complete our short Absence in the NICS User Survey](#)

CHAPTER 1

Working Days Lost through Sickness Absence

13.8 working days lost on average due to
sickness absence

6.3% of available working days lost due
to sickness absence

£44.0 million in estimated direct salary cost

1. WORKING DAYS LOST THROUGH SICKNESS ABSENCE

Absence levels vary by Department, grade level, sex, age group, and the length of service of staff. This chapter contains a look at trends across these variables over the last five years as well as comparative information from other public and private sector bodies. Supporting information can be found in 1.2 Further information relating to working days lost within [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

1.1 Introduction

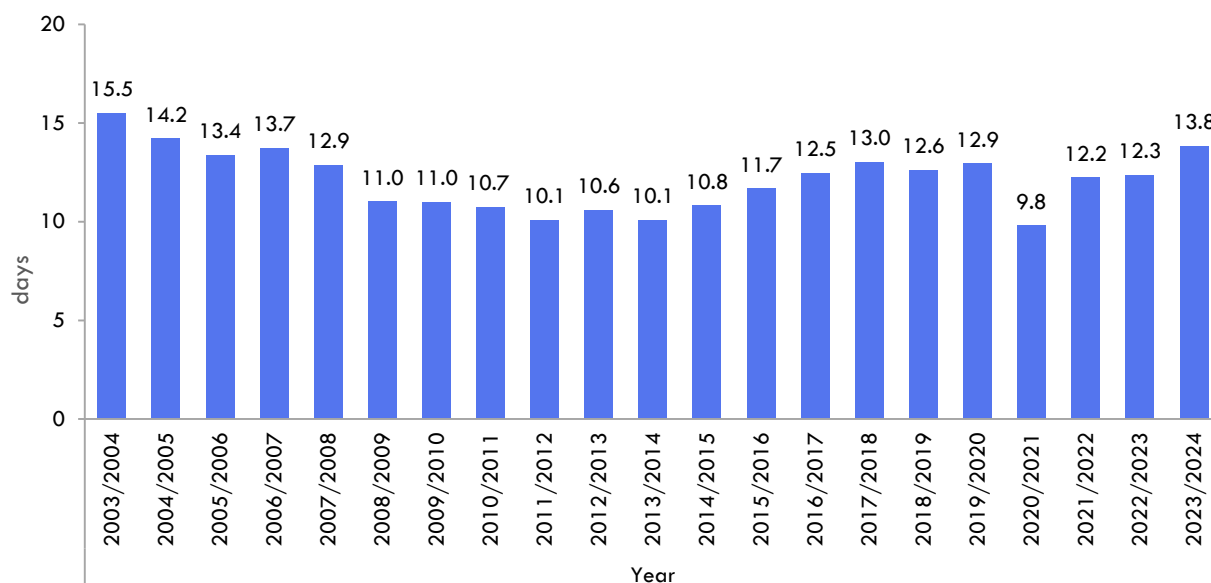
Staff in the NICS lost an average of 13.8 days to sickness absence in 2023/2024 - an increase from the previous year when staff lost 12.3 days.

In total, 6.3% of all available working days were lost due to sickness absence, equating to an estimated £44.0 million in direct salary cost¹, equivalent to around 4.0% of the total NICS pay bill. This is an increase on the previous year when 5.7% of available working days were lost at an estimated cost of £39 million.

All three main measures of sickness absence - working days lost per staff year, the percentage of available working days lost and estimated production - were higher than the previous year. Looking at longer trends, figure 1 below shows that during the mid 2000s around 13.7-15.5 days were lost on average per staff year. This then dropped over subsequent years until 2011/2012 when it reached a low of 10.1 days. In the 12 years since then the absence level has generally increased (with the exception of 2020/2021; the lowest recorded absence level over the past twenty years). Absence figures then returned to around pre-pandemic levels in 2021/2022 and have continued to rise to the current high, the highest average working days lost since 2004/2005.

Figure 1

Working Days Lost per Staff Year² in NICS (2003/2004 to 2023/2024)³



Staff who either retire early on medical grounds or are dismissed because of inefficiency due to excessive sickness absence are entitled to receive up to 13 weeks' notice. In line with Cabinet Office guidelines, any sickness absences during this notice period are included in the overall statistics. It is estimated that these absences added around 0.3 of a day to the overall absence level. If they were excluded, the headline figure of 13.8 days would reduce to 13.5 days.

¹ Direct Salary Cost is calculated using direct costs alone and does not consider any associated costs such as for overtime and replacement staff. Any information provided in this report that relates to direct salary cost is calculated, where possible, on the basis of each individual's actual salary and the associated employer's National Insurance and Superannuation contributions.

² One staff year is the equivalent of one full-time member of staff being in work for a full year. It takes account of staff leaving / joining as well as part-time working patterns.

³ There was a new HR System and recording process introduced in 2008/09. Data for DoJ, PPS and Industrial staff were included from 2010/11 onwards.

1.2 Department

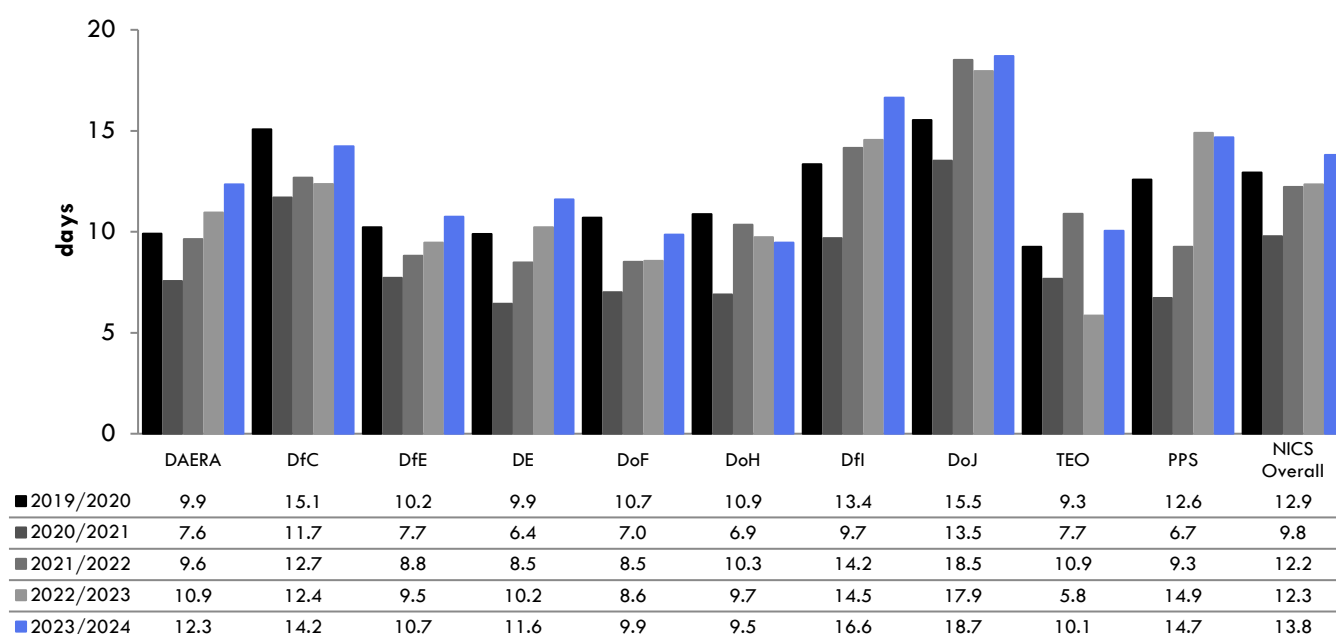
The average number of working days lost due to sickness absence in 2023/2024 ranged from 9.5 days for The Department of Health (DoH) to 18.7 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ), as shown below in Figure 2.

The majority of departments saw a rise in their absence levels from last year, with the Executive Office (TEO) experiencing the greatest increase.

The Department for Communities contain around 29.6% of all NICS staff and had the biggest impact on the overall increase in absence level. Within DfC the majority of grade levels experienced a rise, with Administrative Assistant (AO) having the biggest impact on this increase. To view each Department's contribution to the overall absence level, see Table 7.1 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

Figure 2

Working Days Lost per Staff Year by Department (2019/2020 to 2023/2024)¹



Departmental staffing profiles can have a major influence on relative absence levels. This needs to be considered when making Departmental comparisons. More appropriate like-for-like comparisons can be obtained Table 6.1 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#) which provides Departmental absence figures standardised to the age, grade and sex profile of the NICS as a whole in order to eliminate the impact of staffing factors. In the majority of Departments, standardised absence levels are lower than their unadjusted figure. DoJ's figures showed the greatest reduction, falling from 18.7 to 13.4 days lost through sickness absence.

¹ Staff in HSENI and OAGNI are included in the NICS Overall figure only.

1.3 Grade Level

Within this report, non-industrial staff are separated into analogous grade levels, while Industrial and Prison Grade staff are reported separately.

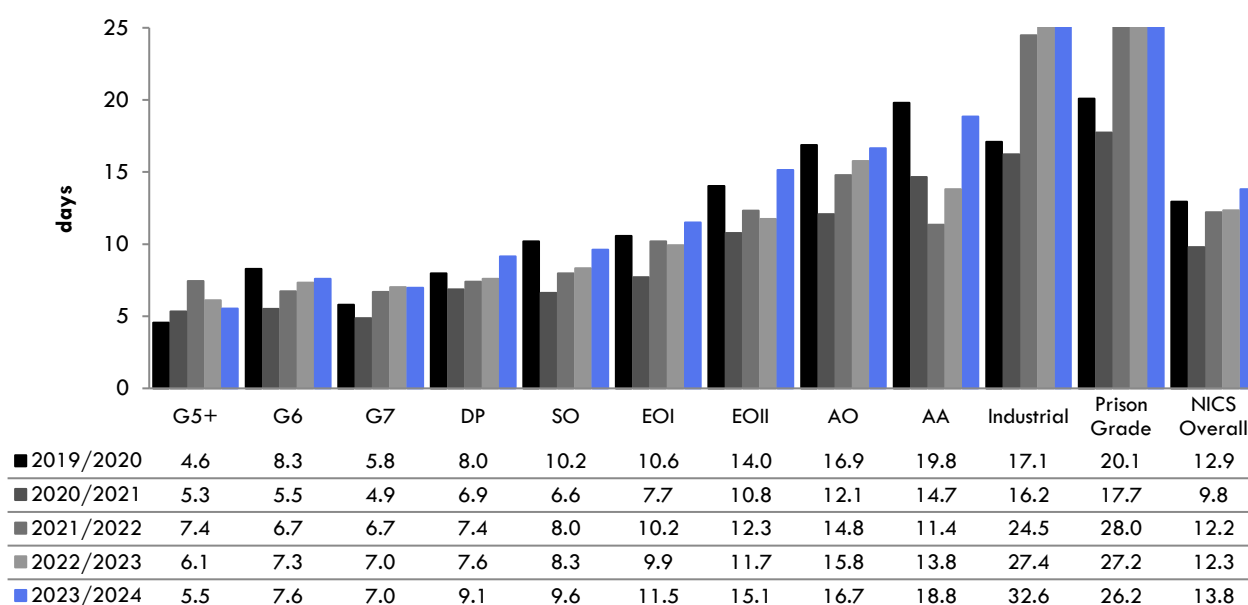
There is notable variation in absence levels across grade levels, although a general trend of decreasing levels of absence as grade level increases can be observed. As shown in Figure 3, the average number of working days lost in 2023/2024 ranged from 5.5 days for staff at Grade 5 + level to 32.6 days for Industrial staff.

The majority of grade levels reported a rise compared with 2022/2023, with industrial staff experiencing the largest increase.

The AO level encompassed the largest number of staff - representing 19.7% of the NICS. However staff at EOII level had the biggest impact on the increase in the overall NICS absence level in 2023/2024. For detailed information on each grade level's contribution to the overall NICS absence level, see Table 7.2 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

Figure 3

Working Days Lost per Staff Year by Analogous Grade Level (2019/2020 to 2023/2024)¹



¹ For the purpose of this analysis all former Northern Ireland Office staff at the Band C grade level have been classified as analogous to the EOII grade level.

1.4 Sex

Figure 4 shows the absence level increased for both males and females in 2023/2024, with males experiencing an average of 12.9 days and females an average of 14.8 days.

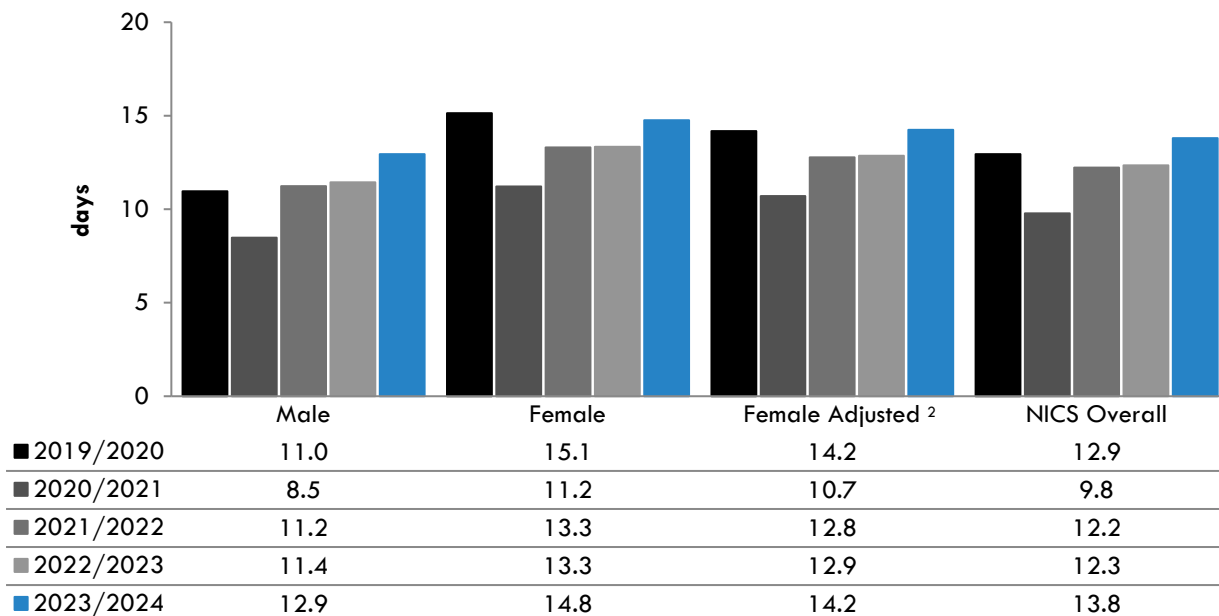
Female staff have historically had a higher level of absence than males, with a difference of around 3 to 4 days observed in recent years. However in the last three years this difference was reduced to around 2.0 days. There are also other factors to take into account when comparing the difference between males and females.

The largest cause of the difference was Pregnancy Related Disorders. If this cause was excluded, the adjusted absence level for females fell from 14.8 days to 14.2 days. If all gender-specific absences¹ were excluded from the absence figures the difference between male and female absence would fall to 0.5 days (13.3 days for females and 12.8 days for males).

To view the contribution of each sex to the overall NICS absence level, see Table 7.3 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

Figure 4

Working Days Lost per Staff Year by Sex (2019/2020 to 2023/2024)



¹ Absences due to Pregnancy Related Disorders, gender-specific Genitourinary and Gynaecological Disorders and gender-specific Benign and Malignant Tumours, Cancers.

² Excludes absences due to Pregnancy Related Disorders.

1.5 Length of Service

Staff with less than two years' service in NICS lost an average of 8.5 days through sickness absence in 2023/2024. This was almost six days less than the average number of days lost (14.3 days) by staff with more than two years of service, as shown in Table 1.

The lower level of sickness absence among new staff was a likely consequence of the one year probationary period each staff member undergoes immediately after joining NICS. The probation regime includes more stringent conditions concerning the management of sickness absence compared to those not on probation. For probationary staff, each absence spell leads to a review and the consideration of potential inefficiency action.

Table 1

Working Days Lost per Staff Year by Length of Service (2019/2020 to 2023/2024)

Length of Service	Working Days Lost per Staff Year 2019/2020	Working Days Lost per Staff Year 2020/2021	Working Days Lost per Staff Year 2021/2022	Working Days Lost per Staff Year 2022/2023	Working Days Lost per Staff Year 2023/2024
Less than 1 year	3.6	2.5	3.6	5.0	5.8
1 to less than 2 years	8.3	6.0	6.1	7.4	9.4
Less than 2 years	6.1	4.9	4.6	6.6	8.5
2 to less than 3 years	13.0	11.5	11.3	11.7	13.1
3 to less than 4 years	16.1	10.7	15.7	13.7	14.5
4 to less than 5 years	11.5	12.0	13.2	17.9	14.0
5 years or more	13.2	10.0	13.0	13.0	14.4
2 years or more	13.3	10.1	13.0	13.1	14.3
NICS Overall	12.9	9.8	12.2	12.3	13.8

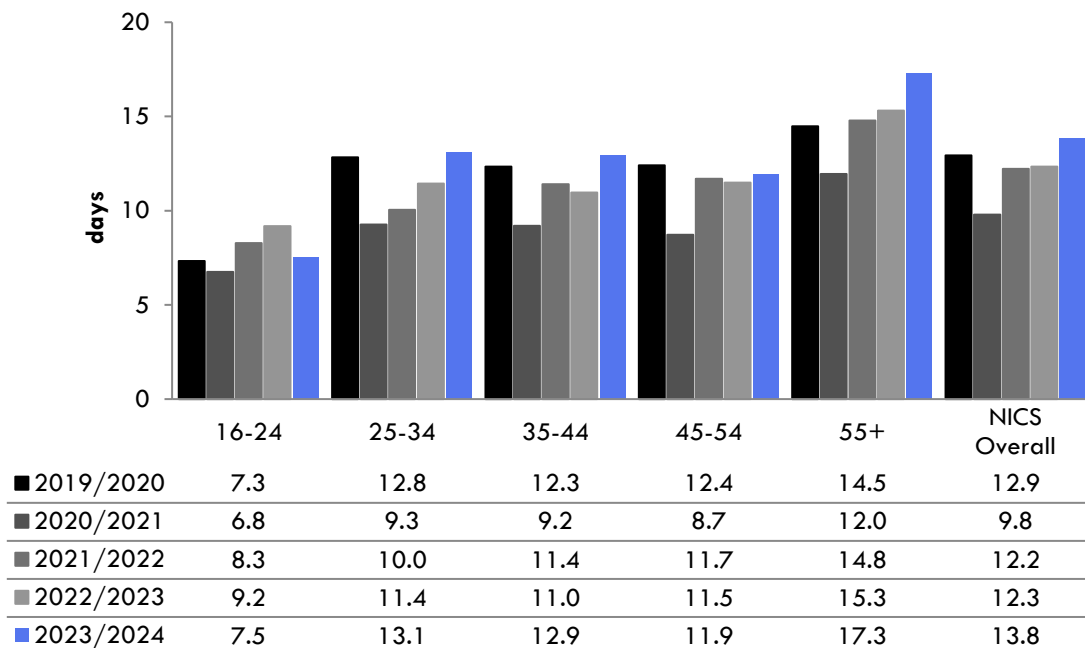
1.6 Age Group

Figure 5 shows the average number of working days lost ranged from 7.5 days for staff aged 16-24 to 17.3 days for staff aged 55+. It should be noted, however, that the youngest age group (16-24) accounted for only 1.3% of NICS staff.

The majority of age groups experienced an increase in absence levels, with staff in the 55+ age group experiencing the largest increase. To see the age comparisons in greater detail, see Table 2.2.4 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

Figure 5

Working Days Lost per Staff Year by Age Group (2019/2020 to 2023/2024)



1.7 Comparison with other Organisations

Care should be taken when making comparisons with sickness absence figures produced by other organisations. Methods of data collection/reporting is likely to vary among organisations and some may not be as robust as others.

For instance, some organisations report on a "per person/employee" method while the NICS reports on a "per staff year"¹ basis, as per Cabinet Office guidelines, which methodologically tends to return a higher figure.

Typically the number of staff years will be less than the headcount of staff as it takes part-time staff into account. An organisation's Working Days Lost per Staff Year figure will therefore 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.

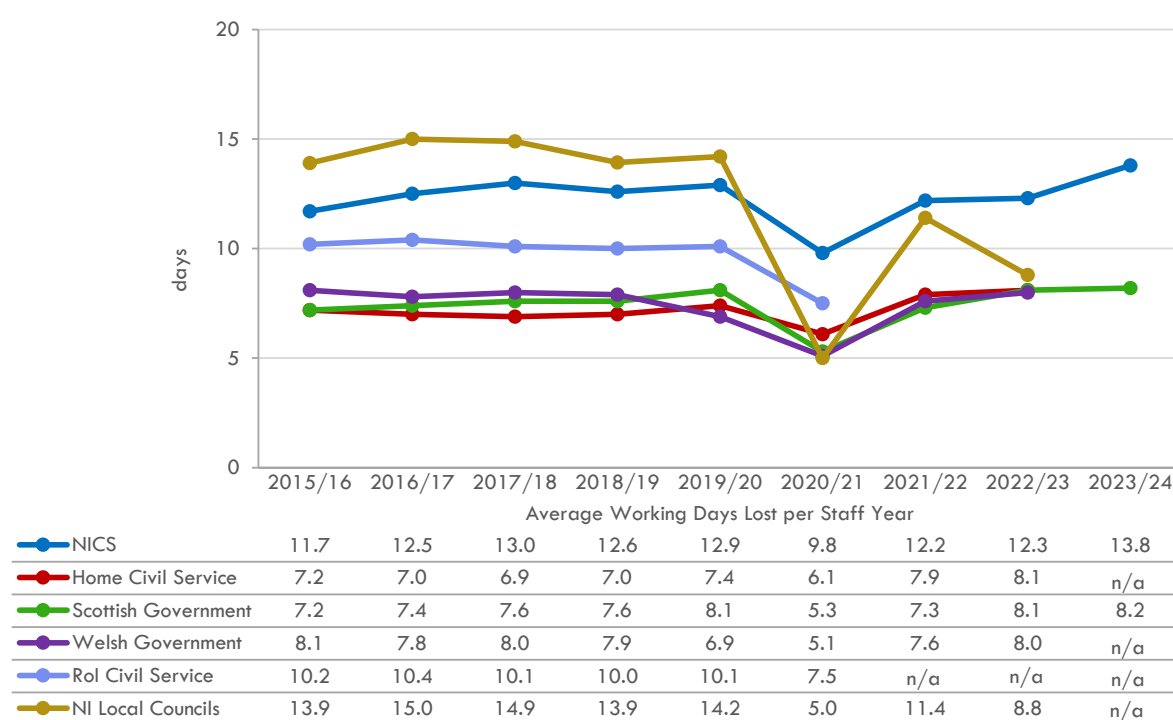
Comparison with other Civil Service Sickness Absence Statistics/Local Councils (2015/2016 to 2023/2024)

Each public sector organisation listed below in Figure 6 varies in how they report sickness absence statistics. Similar to the NICS, the Home Civil Service, Scottish Government and Welsh Government report on a per Staff Year basis although other steps in the recording differ from that of the NICS. Without detailed, published methodologies from these organisations it is not possible to assess comparability of these figures to the NICS. The Republic of Ireland Civil Service reports absence on a per full time equivalent basis and NI Local Councils report on a per employee basis.

Figure 6 shows the average working days lost per staff year increased from 2022/23 to 2023/24 for the NICS and Scottish Government. There were no 2023/24 sickness absence statistics available for the other areas at the time of publication. This publication will be updated when the 23/24 data becomes available. The Republic of Ireland Civil Service ceased publishing sickness absence statistics in 2020. For more detailed information and links to each organisations sickness absence statistics, see Appendix 3.

Figure 6

Average Working Days Lost per Staff Year¹ in UK/Rol Civil Service and Local Councils (2015/16 to 2023/24)^{2,3}



¹ One staff year is the equivalent of one full-time member of staff being in work for a full year. It takes account of staff leaving/joining as well as part-time working patterns.

² n/a: No figures published/available.

³ Rol Civil Service figures are for calendar years from 2013 to 2020. Rol Civil Service ceased publishing sickness absence statistics in 2020.

Comparison with the Private Sector

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) commission a survey each year that reports on levels of sickness absence across the various UK labour market sectors. Due to Covid-19 related complications, CIPD were unable to report reliable sickness absence rates in 2021 and 2022, however normal reporting resumed in 2023. CIPD figures for 2024 are not yet available. This publication will be updated when the 2024 data becomes available.

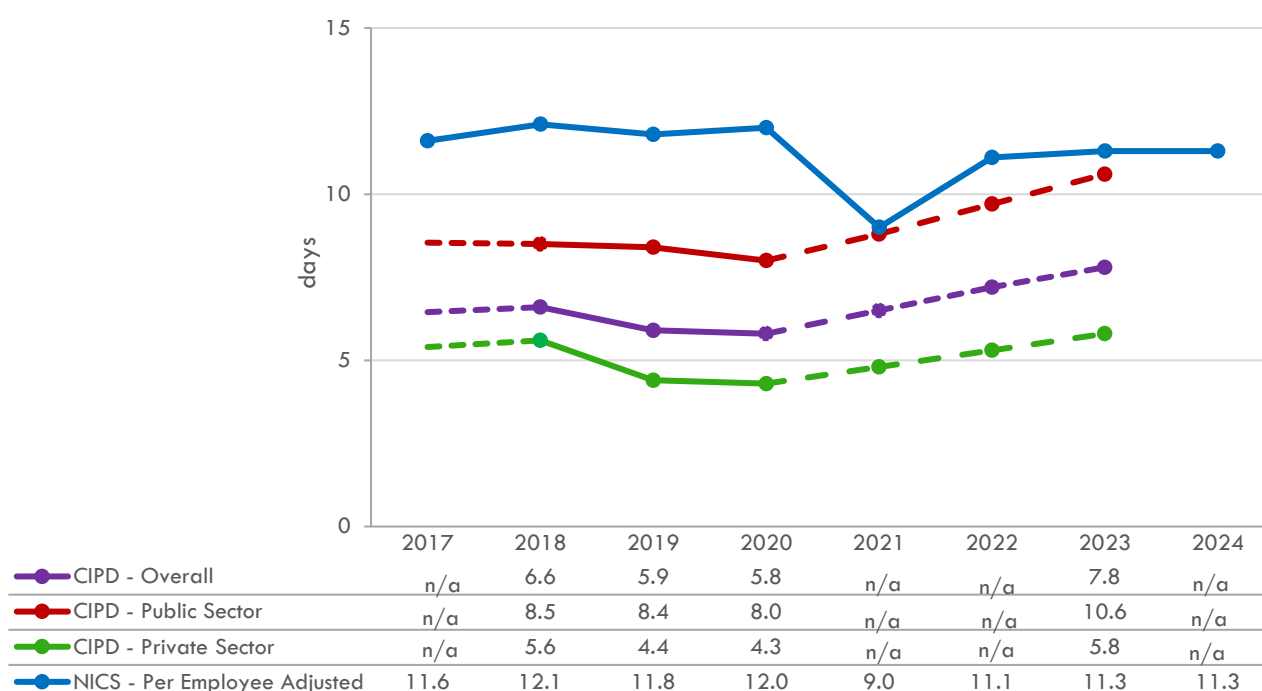
As their figures are normally based on survey returns they can be affected by response bias. For example, firms with solid methods of data collection and more robust/acceptable figures to report may be the ones most likely to send in their figures.

The NICS Working Days Lost per Employee figure (as opposed to per Staff Year¹) has been included below to provide a more direct comparison with the private sector. Figure 7 shows that this NICS figure remained 11.3 at days in 2024. However it is again worth noting care should be taken when comparing these figures due to differing methods of data collection/reporting.

For more detailed information and links to each organisations sickness absence statistics, see Appendix 3.

Figure 7

Average Working Days Lost per Employee CIPD² (2017 to 2024)³



¹ One staff year is the equivalent of one full-time member of staff being in work for a full year. It takes account of staff leaving/joining as well as part-time working patterns.

² CIPD figures are based on an annual survey with between 342 (2014) and over 1,000 (2020) responses. 918 organisations responded in 2023. The figures also exclude the top and bottom 5% of responses and are reported on a "per employee" basis – a methodology that tends to report a lower level of absence than a "per Staff Year" approach. The figures reported by CIPD for 2023 relate to their survey undertaken in March/April 2023.

³ n/a: No figures published/available.

CHAPTER 2

Spells of Sickness Absence

56.9% of staff had **no** sickness absence

58.4% of absence spells lasted five working days or less

90.8% of working days lost were covered by a medical certificate

2. SPELLS OF SICKNESS ABSENCE

This chapter looks at the number and duration of sickness absence spells and how they were certified. Supporting information can be found in 2.2 Further information relating to the number and duration of sickness absence spells within [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

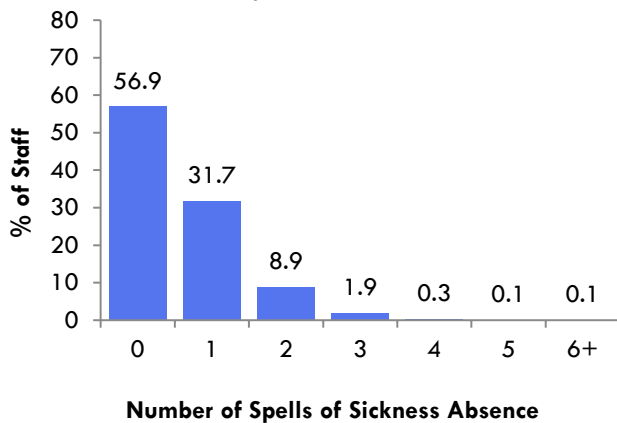
2.1 Number of Absence Spells

Figure 8 shows that in 2023/2024, 56.9% of all staff had no spells of sickness absence - a decrease from the previous year when 57.8% of staff had none. One spell of absence was recorded for 31.7% of staff, 8.9% had two spells, while the remaining 2.5% of staff were absent on three or more occasions.

The proportion of staff with no absence varied markedly between Departments from 50.1% in DoJ to 68.0% in TEO (see Table 2.2.10 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#)).

Figure 8

Number of Absence Spells

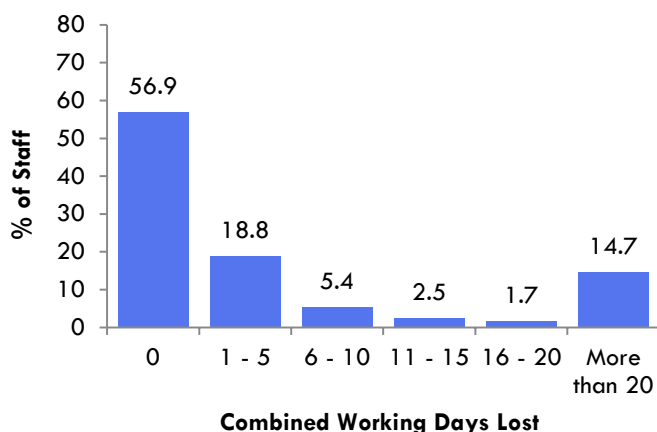


2.2 Combined Working Days Lost

Figure 9 shows that 18.8% of staff were absent for between one and five days in total during 2023/2024. Meanwhile, the percentage of staff who were absent for a total of more than 20 days during the year was 14.7% - a increase on last year's figure of 13.3% (see Table 2.2.8 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#)).

Figure 9

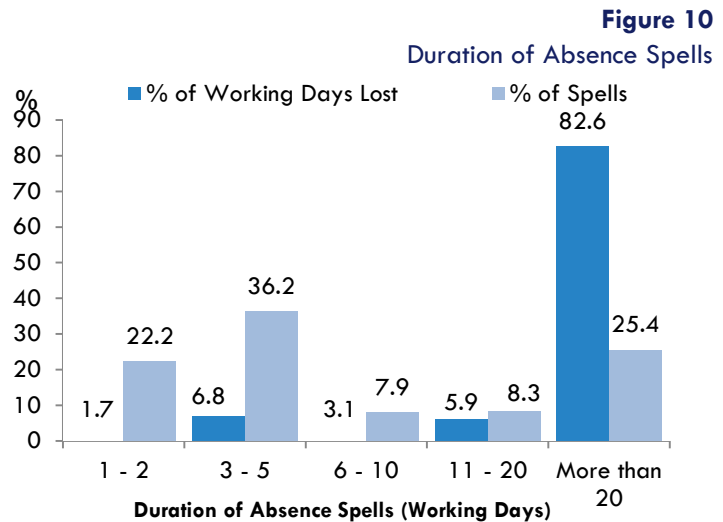
Combined Working Days Lost¹



¹ The total number of working days lost for an individual, counted across all their absence spells, during the financial year.

2.2 Duration of Absence Spells

Around 14,500 sickness absence spells were recorded in 2023/2024, approximately 400 less than in the previous year. Figure 10 shows that 58.4% of spells were relatively short - lasting five working days or less. Such absences, however, only accounted for 8.5% of the total working days lost to sickness absence. In total, short-term absences (those lasting 20 working days or less) accounted for 74.6% of all spells.



Long-term absences (those lasting more than 20 days) made up the vast majority of all working days lost. Although they represented only 25.4% of spells, they accounted for 82.6% of all working days lost, as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 11
Number of Spells by Duration - Short-term Absences

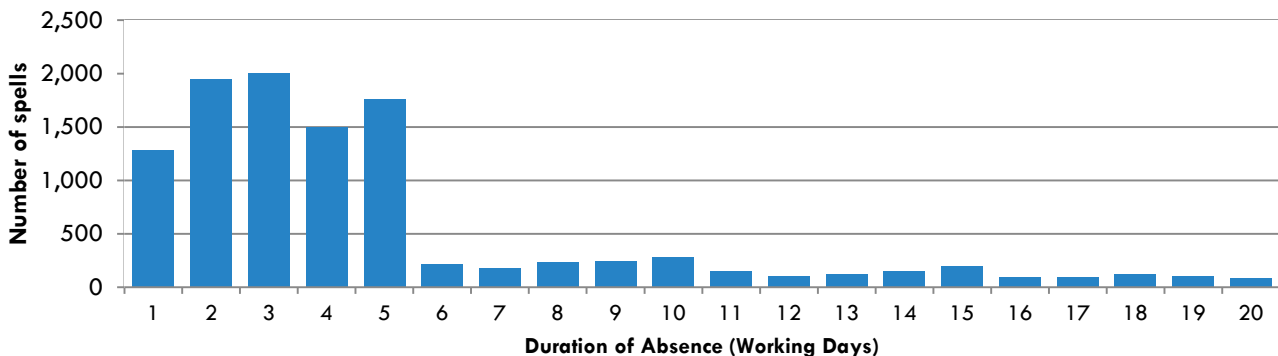
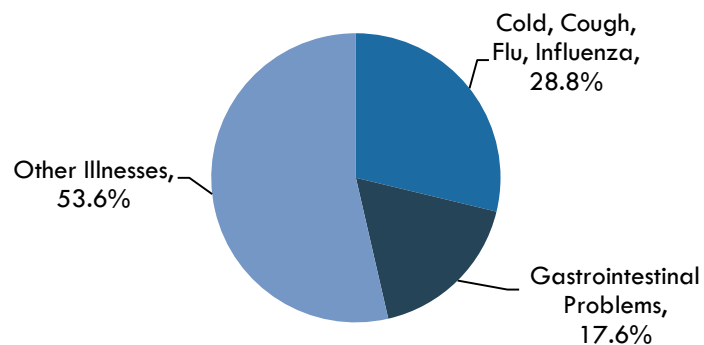


Figure 11 shows just over 2,000 spells of absence lasted for three working days - the most frequent duration of all absences.

Short-term absence spells were predominately due to *Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza* (28.8%) or *Gastrointestinal Problems* (17.6%) as shown in Figure 12. It is worth noting that any sickness absences due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) are categorised under *Chest and Respiratory problems*¹. For specific analysis of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) absences see section 3.5.

Figure 12
Short-Term Absences - % of Spells by Reason



An analysis of long-term absences can be found in Chapter 4.

¹ 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, this was reduced to the first 5 calendar days. From 10 October 2022, an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as sickness absence. Subsequently caution should be taken when reading trend information.

2.4 Absence Certification¹

All NICS staff are required to have their spells of sickness absence certified. For absences of seven calendar days or less staff are able to self-certify whereas, for longer absences, a Medical Certificate from a medical practitioner or hospital is required. Given the short duration of many absences, it is not surprising that the majority (50.6%) of spells were self-certified with medically certified absences making up a further 41.7% of the total.

Absences which were uncertified or missing a certification have been classified here as 'other' and accounted for 7.8% of absence spells.

As would be expected, self-certified absences did not last as long as certified absences. On average, self-certified absences lasted 3.1 working days while certified absences lasted 42.6 working days (see Table 2.2.1 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#)).

The majority of working days lost were certified by a doctor or hospital. Absences certified in this manner accounted for 90.8% of the total working days lost, equating to 12.5 days lost per staff year or 5.8% of the available working days (see Table 1.2.3 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#)). Self-certified absences accounted for a further 7.5% of the working days lost while 'other' absences made up the remaining 1.7%, as shown in Figure 14.

Further information about absence certification (including a Departmental breakdown) is available in Tables 2.2.1 to 2.2.4 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

Figure 13

% of Absence Spells by Certification

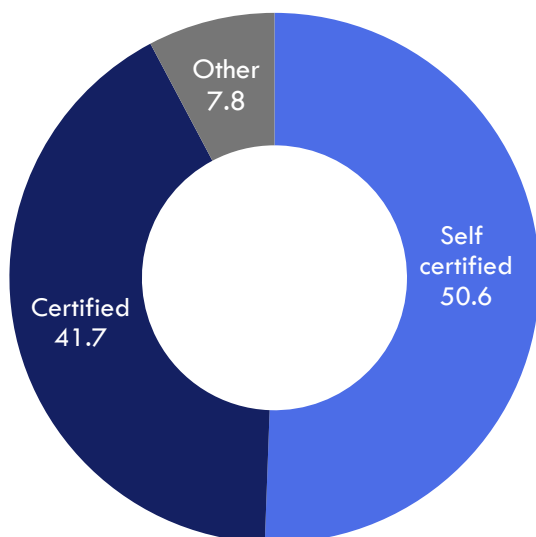
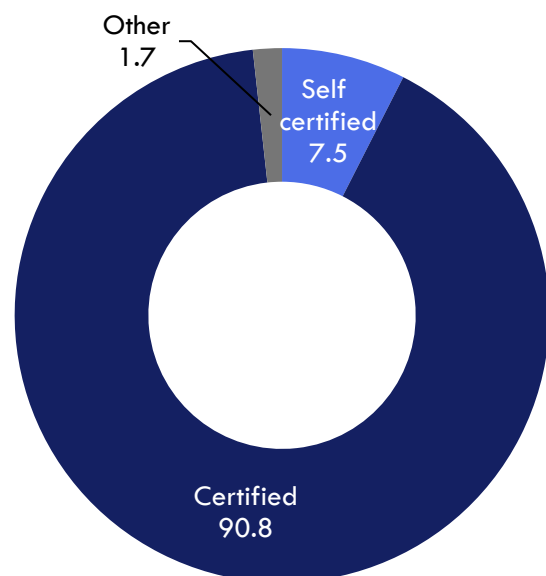


Figure 14

% of Working Days Lost by Certification



CHAPTER 3

Reason for Sickness Absence

The main reason for absence was

**Anxiety/Stress/Depression/
Other Psychiatric Illnesses** accounting
for **over 1 in 3** working days lost

3. REASON FOR SICKNESS ABSENCE

This chapter looks at the reasons for sickness absence. More analyses are presented in 3.2 Further information relating to reasons for sickness absence including Covid-19 further analysis within [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).¹

3.1 NICS Overall

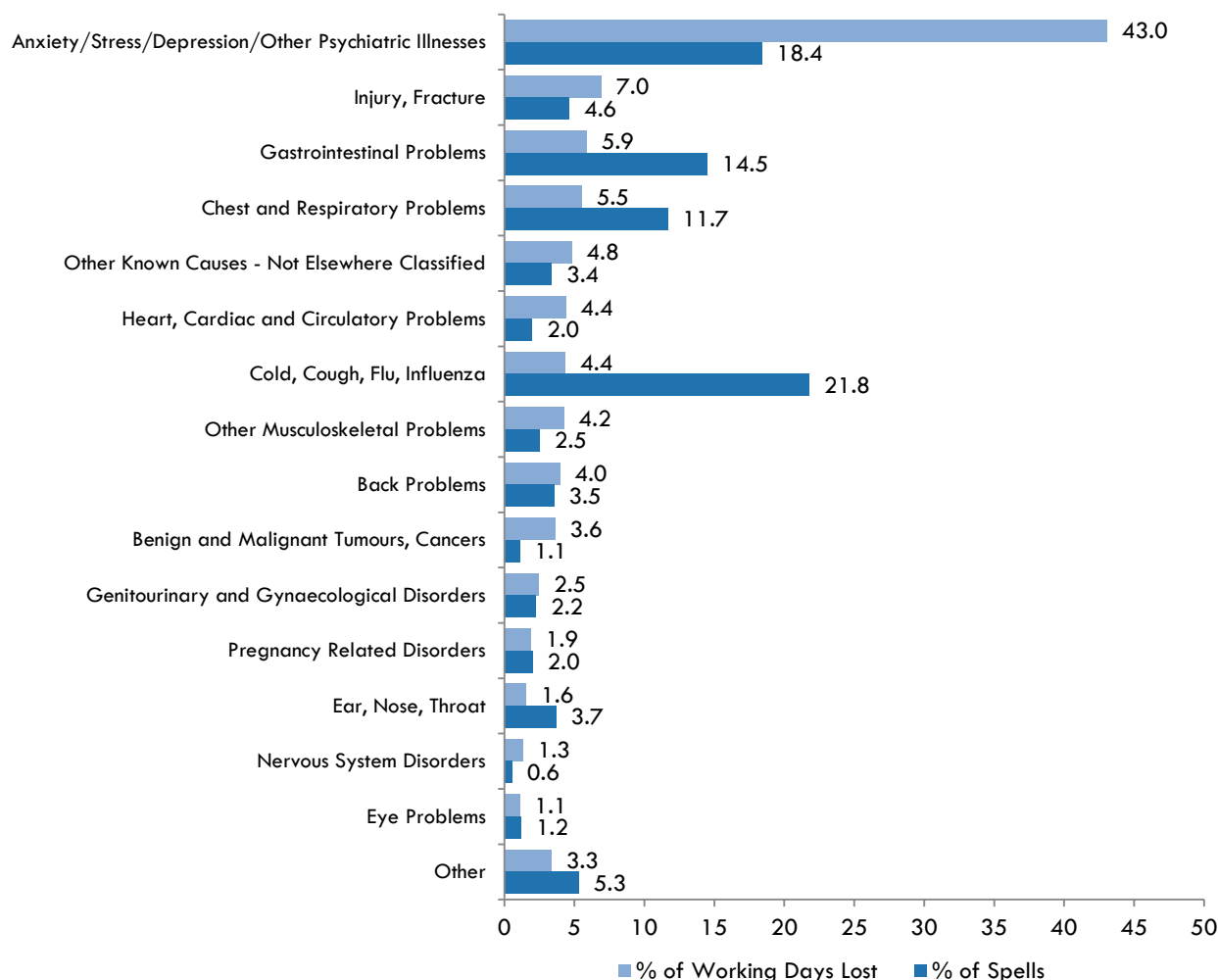
Absences recorded as Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza and Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses accounted for 40.2% of all absence spells in 2023/2024. Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses and Injury, Fracture accounted for the highest proportion of working days lost.

As in previous years, Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses remained the reason behind the highest proportion of working days lost. Figure 15 shows this reason accounted for 43.0% of the total working days lost while 32.8% of the working days lost within this illness category were recorded as work-related stress (see Table 3.2.4 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#)). To view each absence type's contribution to the overall NICS absence level, see Table 7.5 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

Sickness absences due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) are categorised under Chest and Respiratory Problems throughout these analyses. For specific analysis of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) absences see section 3.5.

Figure 15^{2,3}

Reason for Absence



¹ 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, this was reduced to the first 5 calendar days. From 10 October 2022, an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as sickness absence. Subsequently caution should be taken when reading trend information.

² The category 'Other' contains any absence with a reason that accounted for less than 1% of the working days lost.

³ The category 'No Reason Specified' contains any absence for which the reason was 'Not Specified', 'Awaiting Reason' or missing.

The average duration of an absence is linked to the nature and severity of the illness involved.

Absences caused by Substance Abuse had the longest average duration at 70.4 working days, as shown in Table 2. These absences, however, were quite rare and only accounted for 0.1% of absence spells. By contrast, absences due to *Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses* not only had the fourth highest average duration (49.6 working days) but also accounted for 18.4% of spells.

At the other end of the scale, absences due to *Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza* had the shortest average duration at 4.3 days. For a detailed breakdown of absence reason by spells, see Table 3.2.2 in [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

Table 2^{1,2}

Average Duration of Absence by Reason

Reason for Absence	Working Days
Substance Abuse	70.4
Benign and Malignant Tumours, Cancers	69.8
Nervous System Disorders	50.1
Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses	49.6
Heart, Cardiac and Circulatory Problems	47.2
Other Musculoskeletal Problems	35.9
Blood Disorders	35.7
Injury, Fracture	31.8
Endocrine/Glandular Problems	30.6
Other Known Causes - Not Elsewhere Classified	30.2
Back Problems	23.7
Genitourinary and Gynaecological Disorders	23.2
Pregnancy Related Disorders	20.0
Eye Problems	19.5
Skin Disorders	18.5
Infectious Diseases	13.0
Asthma	11.0
Chest and Respiratory Problems	10.0
Burns, Poisoning, Frostbite, Hypothermia	9.5
Ear, Nose, Throat	9.0
Gastrointestinal Problems	8.6
Headache/Migraine	7.4
Dental and Oral Problems	4.6
Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza	4.3
No Reason Specified	21.5

¹ The category 'No Reason Specified' contains any absence for which the reason was 'Not Specified', 'Awaiting Reason' or missing.

² The analysis only takes account of the working days lost by each absence during the specific financial year.

The following three tables show the percentage of total working days lost by grade level, sex and age group. Shading denotes the reason for the largest proportion of working days lost for each subgroup.

3.2 Grade Level

Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric illnesses accounted for the highest percentage of working days lost at all grade levels, as shown in Table 3. All grade levels aside from G7+ and AA staff experienced an increase in the proportion of working days lost to this reason compared with 2022/2023. Industrial staff experienced the most notable change, which saw the proportion increase from 25.9% to 40.5%.

Prison Grade and Industrial staff had a noticeably higher proportion of working days lost to *Injury, Fracture* than staff in other grade levels, while Industrial staff also experienced a high level of *Back Problems*. This situation is likely to reflect the type of work undertaken by these grades. It should also be noted that the AA staff group accounted for only 1.6% of NICS staff when considering the high levels of *Back Problems* within this category.

Table 3^{1,2,3}

Reason for Absence by Grade Level

Reason for Absence	% of Working Days Lost G7+	% of Working Days Lost DP	% of Working Days Lost SO	% of Working Days Lost EOI	% of Working Days Lost EOI	% of Working Days Lost AO	% of Working Days Lost AA	% of Working Days Lost Industrial	Working Days Lost Prison Grade
Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses	33.5	43.6	40.3	41.7	42.0	48.4	28.3	40.5	45.6
Asthma	-	0.3	-	0.1	0.2	0.2	.	0.2	-
Back Problems	5.1	2.2	3.4	3.6	4.2	3.2	3.1	8.3	4.5
Benign and Malignant Tumours, Cancers	6.3	3.5	6.0	4.7	3.4	3.5	5.4	1.8	0.8
Blood Disorders	0.8	0.7	-	0.0	1.0	0.4	-	-	-
Burns, Poisoning, Frostbite, Hypothermia	-	-	-	-	0.2
Chest and Respiratory Problems	5.2	7.2	5.2	5.6	5.7	6.2	7.0	5.1	2.8
Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza	5.0	5.1	5.1	5.1	4.6	4.7	5.2	2.5	2.1
Dental and Oral Problems	-	-	0.2	0.1	-	-	.	0.1	0.1
Ear, Nose, Throat	2.3	1.0	1.8	1.9	2.0	1.9	0.9	0.1	0.6
Endocrine/Glandular Problems	-	-	0.2	0.6	1.0	0.7	-	.	0.0
Eye Problems	0.9	1.6	1.0	1.6	1.3	1.0	3.0	0.5	0.3
Gastrointestinal Problems	5.0	6.7	5.8	5.9	7.8	5.8	7.9	3.6	3.0
Genitourinary and Gynaecological Disorders	3.7	4.2	4.1	3.0	1.7	2.1	7.2	0.9	0.8
Headache/Migraine	1.7	1.3	1.0	0.4	1.1	0.9	0.2	0.8	0.2
Heart, Cardiac and Circulatory Problems	6.2	4.8	6.5	5.8	3.9	3.2	2.6	7.2	2.3
Infectious Diseases	1.0	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.4	0.3	-	.	0.5
Injury, Fracture	8.7	3.2	2.9	4.5	5.7	4.9	7.2	14.6	17.1
Nervous System Disorders	3.0	0.5	3.2	0.5	1.1	1.6	-	1.1	-
Other Known Causes - Not Elsewhere Classified	5.0	4.6	4.0	5.7	2.5	3.4	6.3	3.5	12.3
Other Musculoskeletal Problems	1.6	4.9	3.2	4.2	4.9	3.8	6.8	7.5	3.2
Pregnancy Related Disorders	1.6	1.3	2.8	2.0	2.8	1.7	-	.	1.7
Skin Disorders	0.6	0.5	0.1	0.6	0.4	0.4	-	-	0.4
Substance Abuse	-	.	.	0.1	0.8	0.5	.	.	.
No Reason Specified	1.2	2.1	2.6	2.3	1.2	1.2	-	0.7	1.0
NICS Overall	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

¹ The category 'No Reason Specified' contains any absence for which the reason was 'Not Specified', 'Awaiting Reason' or missing.

² n/a: No cases recorded.

³ Cells with small numbers of occurrences have been suppressed (-).

3.3 Sex

As has been the case for 15 years *Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses* was the reason behind the highest percentage of working days lost for both males and females.

The second highest reason for males was injury, fracture accounting for 9.5% of their working days lost. Gastrointestinal Problems was the second highest reason for females, accounting for 6.1% of their working days lost.

Table 4^{1,2,3}
Reason for Absence by Sex

Reason for Absence	% of Working Days Lost	% of Working Days Lost
	Male	Female
Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses	42.8	43.3
Asthma	0.2	0.2
Back Problems	5.1	2.9
Benign and Malignant Tumours, Cancers	1.9	5.2
Blood Disorders	0.7	0.5
Burns, Poisoning, Frostbite, Hypothermia	0.0	-
Chest and Respiratory Problems	5.8	5.2
Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza	4.6	4.1
Dental and Oral Problems	0.1	-
Ear, Nose, Throat	1.5	1.6
Endocrine/Glandular Problems	0.5	0.5
Eye Problems	0.9	1.3
Gastrointestinal Problems	5.6	6.1
Genitourinary and Gynaecological Disorders	1.1	3.8
Headache/Migraine	0.7	1.1
Heart, Cardiac and Circulatory Problems	5.9	2.9
Infectious Diseases	0.3	0.4
Injury, Fracture	9.5	4.5
Nervous System Disorders	0.9	1.7
Other Known Causes - Not Elsewhere Classified	5.0	4.6
Other Musculoskeletal Problems	4.4	4.1
Pregnancy Related Disorders	.	3.7
Skin Disorders	0.4	0.4
Substance Abuse	0.3	0.2
No Reason Specified	1.6	1.5
NICS Overall	100.0	100.0

¹ The category 'No Reason Specified' contains any absence for which the reason was 'Not Specified', 'Awaiting Reason' or missing.

² n/a: No cases recorded.

³ Cells with small numbers of occurrences have been suppressed (-).

3.4 Age Group

Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses accounted for the highest percentage of working days lost for all age groups, as shown in Table 5.

The only other absence reasons to exceed 10% of working days lost in any age group were *Injury, Fracture* among the 16-24 (which accounted for 15.5% of their working days lost).

Table 5^{1,2,3}

Reason for Absence by Age Group

Reason for Absence	% of Working Days Lost 16-24	% of Working Days Lost 25-34	% of Working Days Lost 35-44	% of Working Days Lost 45-54	% of Working Days Lost 55+
Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses	45.5	52.0	47.3	42.8	37.1
Asthma	-	0.1	-	0.4	0.1
Back Problems	-	2.4	3.9	4.5	4.2
Benign and Malignant Tumours, Cancers	.	1.2	2.3	3.5	5.6
Blood Disorders	-	-	0.4	0.5	0.9
Burns, Poisoning, Frostbite, Hypothermia	-	-	-	0.0	-
Chest and Respiratory Problems	3.5	3.9	5.8	5.7	5.7
Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza	8.2	5.5	5.3	4.7	3.0
Dental and Oral Problems	.	0.1	0.1	0.1	-
Ear, Nose, Throat	3.6	1.6	1.4	2.2	1.2
Endocrine/Glandular Problems	-	0.2	0.8	0.4	0.5
Eye Problems	-	0.1	0.6	1.2	1.7
Gastrointestinal Problems	9.6	5.7	6.1	6.5	5.2
Genitourinary and Gynaecological Disorders	-	1.2	3.0	2.8	2.3
Headache/Migraine	0.3	0.8	1.1	0.6	1.0
Heart, Cardiac and Circulatory Problems	.	1.1	2.7	4.1	7.0
Infectious Diseases	3.0	0.3	0.6	0.3	0.3
Injury, Fracture	15.5	9.3	5.2	6.1	8.0
Nervous System Disorders	-	0.7	0.9	1.2	1.8
Other Known Causes - Not Elsewhere Classified	2.7	3.8	4.2	5.6	5.0
Other Musculoskeletal Problems	-	0.9	2.1	4.1	7.2
Pregnancy Related Disorders	-	6.8	4.1	0.1	.
Skin Disorders	.	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.2
Substance Abuse	.	.	0.4	0.3	0.3
No Reason Specified	-	1.4	1.3	1.8	1.6
NICS Overall	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

¹ The category 'No Reason Specified' contains any absence for which the reason was 'Not Specified', 'Awaiting Reason' or missing.

² n/a: No cases recorded.

³ Cells with small numbers of occurrences have been suppressed (-).

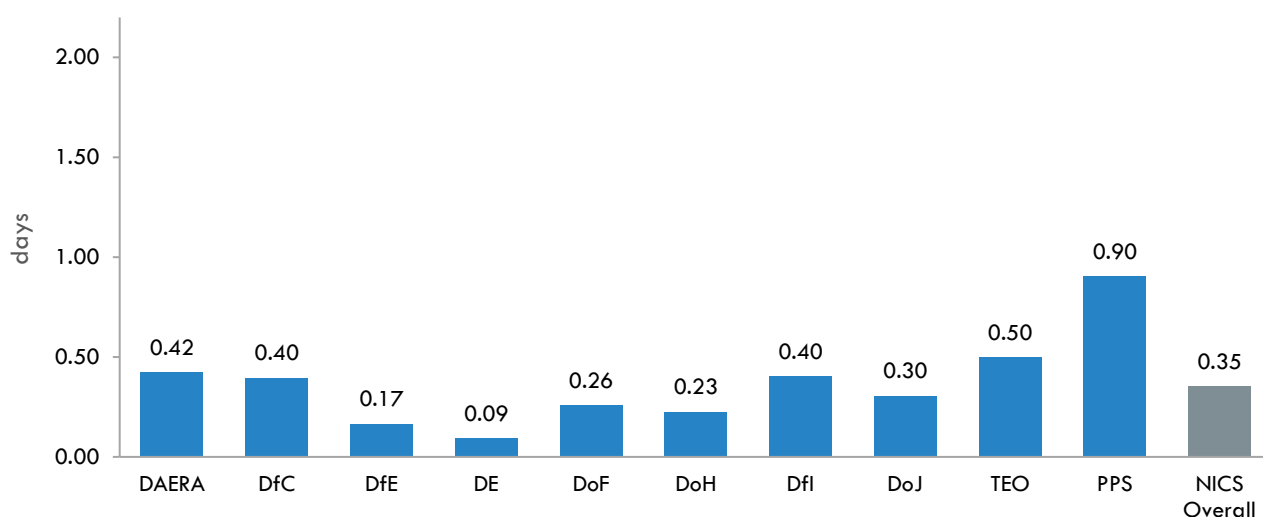
3.5 Sickness Absence due to *COVID-19* (Coronavirus)¹

In the 2023/2024 reporting year there were 937 spells of *COVID-19* in the NICS, amounting to 7,876 working days. This equated to 0.35 working days lost per staff year or 0.16% of all available working days. *COVID-19* represented 2.6% of all sickness absence days that occurred in 2023/2024.

Figure 16 shows that across Departments the level of absence ranged from 0.09 working days per staff year in The Department of Education (DE) to 0.9 days in the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). This equated to 6.2% of all sickness absence days in PPS and 0.42% of all available days. For further information on *COVID-19* absences by Department see Table 3.2.7 in the [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

Figure 16

Working Days Lost per Staff Year by Department due to *COVID-19*



Industrial staff had the highest level of *COVID-19* sickness absence with 0.66 working days lost per staff year, with AO staff also experiencing similar levels with 0.47 days. More information on the *COVID-19* absences by Grade Level can be found in Table 3.2.8 in the [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

Males and Females experienced similar levels of *COVID-19* sickness absence, accounting for 2.9% of all Male absence in 2023/2024 and 2.3% of all Female absence (see Table 3.2.9 in the [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#)). Across different Age Groups those aged 55+ had the highest level of *COVID-19* absence with 0.4 days per staff year and staff in the 25-34 age bracket experienced the lowest with 0.15 days (see Table 3.2.10 in the [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#)).

¹ 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, this was reduced to the first 5 calendar days. From 10 October 2022, an absence attributed to *COVID-19* was recorded as sickness absence. Subsequently caution should be taken when reading trend information.

CHAPTER 4

Long-term Sickness Absence

14.0% of staff had at least one long-term absence

Long-term absences accounted for **82.6%** of the total working days lost

A long-term average duration of **68.9** working days

27.9% of Prison Grade staff had a long-term absence

4. LONG-TERM SICKNESS ABSENCE

A long-term absence is defined as any spell of absence that lasted more than 20 consecutive working days during the financial year. Additional information can be found in 4.2 Further information relating to long-term sickness absence within [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

4.1 Prevalence of Long-term Absence

In 2023/2024, over one in every seven staff (14.0%) had a long-term absence, as shown in Table 6; this is a higher proportion of staff with a long-term absence than the previous year (12.4%).

These 3,523 staff each had at least one absence spell that lasted anywhere from more than one month to the full year (see Figure 17). The average length of these 3,701 spells was around three calendar months (68.9 working days¹).

Long-term absences accounted for 82.6% of all working days lost, which was an increase on the proportion recorded in 2022/2023. This level of long-term absence would, by way of illustration, be equivalent to the loss of around 1,164 full-time staff for an entire year.

Table 6

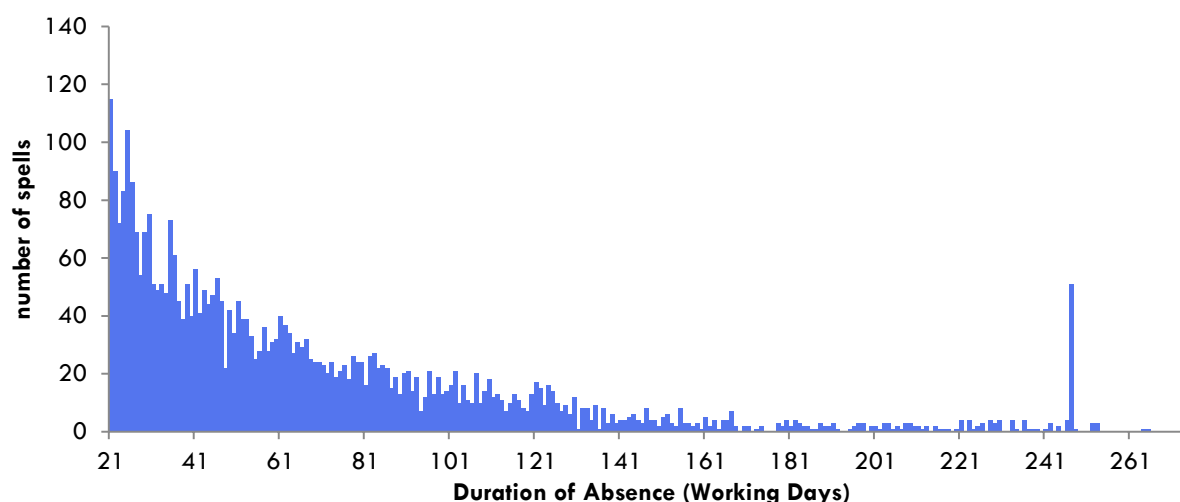
Number of Long-term Absence Spells

Number of Long term Absence Spells	Number of Staff	% of Staff
0	21,710	86.0
1	3,349	13.3
2	170	0.7
3+	4	0.0
NICS Overall	25,233	100.0

Meanwhile, the Frequency Rate² - the number of long-term spells per employee - increased from 13.1% to 14.7%.

Figure 17

Number of Spells by Duration - Long-term Absences (more than 20 working days)³



Although only 16.0% of *all* sickness absence spells lasted longer than two months (41 working days), the working days lost from these absences accounted for 69.5% of the total working days lost.

¹ The figure of 68.9 working days is the mean duration. The median (the middle value of all the long-term absence durations) is 52.7 working days, which equates to 2½ months. These figures only take account of the days lost during the specific financial year. For context, if only long-term absences which ended during 2023/2024 are included in the analysis, the average increases to 76.1 working days (approximately 3½ months).

² Frequency Rate is the average number of long-term absences per employee, expressed as a percentage.
(No of spells of long-term absence in the period/No. of employees) x 100

³ The increase to the far right of Figure 17 relates to 51 spells of absence lasting a standard working year. Some Civil Service occupations are contracted more than a 37 hour standard working week which results in the outliers beyond this.

4.2 Grade Level

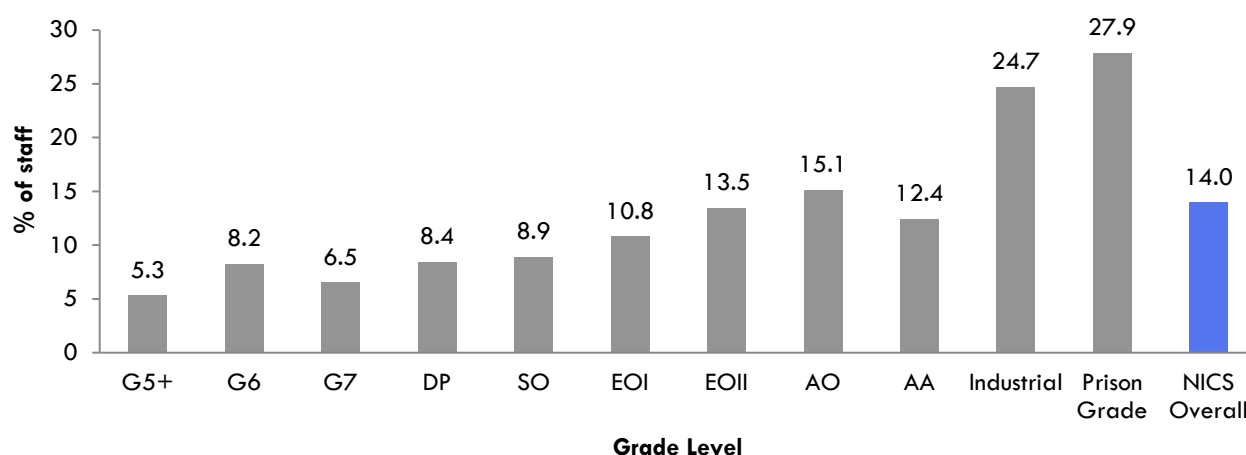
Figure 18 shows Prison Grade staff had the highest incidence of long-term sickness absence - with over a quarter (27.9%) of staff having a long-term absence spell in 2023/2024. This was a decrease on the 2022/2023 figure of 31.4%. The majority of grade levels experienced a increase in incidences of long-term sickness absence spells.

The average long-term duration of Prison Grade absences was 69.0 working days, which was slightly higher than the overall NICS average (68.9 working days). In total, 85.0% of all working days lost by Prison Grade staff were due to long-term absences – however, Industrial staff had the highest percentage (92.2%) of any grade level in this category (see Table 4.2.2 in the [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#)).

In the non-industrial grades, the incidence of long-term absence tended to decrease as grade level increased. For example, 15.1% of the AO grade staff had a long-term absence compared with 5.3% of G5+ staff.

Figure 18

One or More L



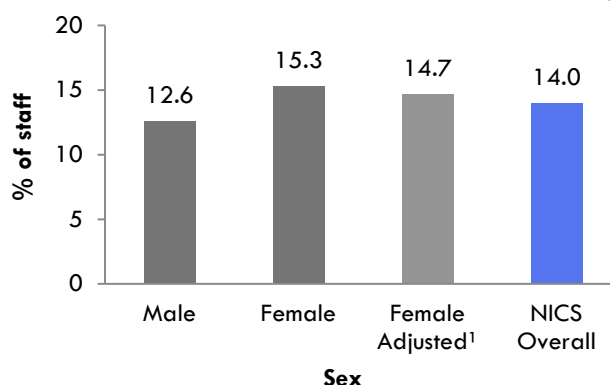
4.3 Sex

Figure 19 shows females had a higher incidence of long-term absence (14.7%) than males (12.6%), even after absences due to *Pregnancy Related Disorders* were excluded.

On the other hand, the average duration of their long-term absences (64.1 days) was shorter than those of males (74.6 days).

For further information, see Table 4.2.3 in the [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#).

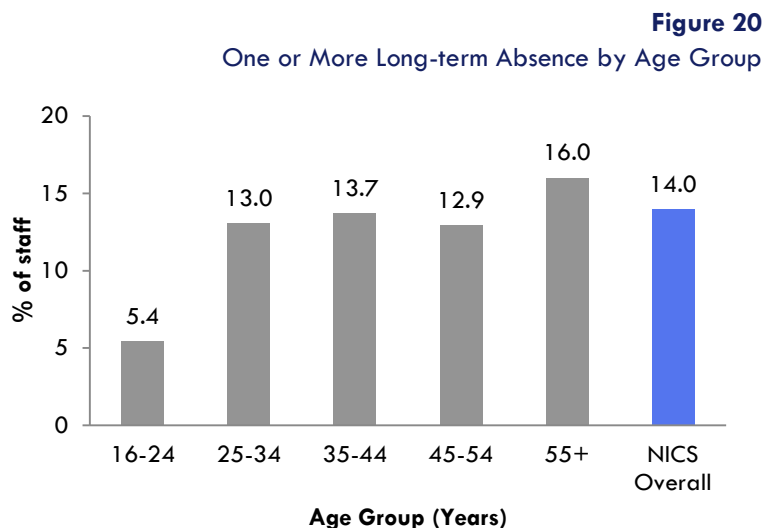
Figure 19
One or More Long-term Absence by Sex



¹ Excludes absences due to Pregnancy Related Disorders.

4.4 Age Group

As shown in Figure 20, a general trend of incidences of long-term absences increasing with age group can be observed. Similarly, excluding the 16-24 age group, the average duration of the long-term absences increased with age (see Table 4.2.4 in the [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 - Figures \(xlsx\)](#)). It should be noted here that the youngest age group (16-24) accounted for only 1.3% of NICS staff.



4.5 Reason for Long-term Absence

Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses accounted for the largest proportion of long-term absences in terms of both the spells (46.5%) and the working days lost (48.9%).

The second highest reason was *Injury, Fracture*, which accounted for 7.3% of the long-term working days lost and 8.2% of the long-term absence spells, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Reason for Long-term Absence^{1,2,3} (% of Long-term Working Days Lost and Long-term Spells)

Reason for Absence	% of Long term Working Days Lost	% of Long term Spells
Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses	48.9	46.5
Injury, Fracture	7.3	8.2
Other Known Causes - Not Elsewhere Classified	5.0	5.8
Heart, Cardiac and Circulatory Problems	4.9	4.0
Gastrointestinal Problems	4.7	5.3
Other Musculoskeletal Problems	4.6	4.3
Benign and Malignant Tumours, Cancers	4.3	3.3
Back Problems	3.9	4.0
Chest and Respiratory Problems	3.6	4.5
Genitourinary and Gynaecological Disorders	2.4	2.6
Pregnancy Related Disorders	1.8	2.2
Nervous System Disorders	1.5	1.2
Other	5.7	6.6
No Reason Specified	1.6	1.5
NICS Overall	100.0	100.0

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

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

³ 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, this was reduced to the first 5 calendar days. From 10 October 2022, an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as sickness absence. Subsequently caution should be taken when reading trend information.

4.6 Long-term Frequency¹

DoJ had the highest frequency of long-term absences in 2023/2024 at 20.8%, which was an increase on the previous year's figure of 20.5%. TEO had the lowest frequency at 10.0%, as shown in Table 8.

All Departments reported an increase in their long-term frequency rate, with TEO experiencing the greatest rise - a frequency rate increased from 6.3% to 10.8%.

Table 8

Long-term Frequency by Department (2019/2020 to 2023/2024)²

Department	Long-term Frequency Rate (%) 2019/2020	Long-term Frequency Rate (%) 2020/2021	Long-term Frequency Rate (%) 2021/2022	Long-term Frequency Rate (%) 2022/2023	Long-term Frequency Rate (%) 2023/2024
DAERA	9.7	8.7	10.8	11.4	12.7
DfC	16.1	13.3	13.7	12.8	14.9
DfE	11.2	9.2	9.9	9.5	10.9
DE	10.0	6.9	9.7	11.6	13.5
DoF	10.3	7.7	8.7	8.3	10.4
DoH	10.3	6.3	10.2	10.5	10.0
DfI	13.9	10.6	14.0	14.1	16.3
DoJ	18.0	16.4	21.2	20.5	20.8
TEO	9.2	6.0	12.6	6.3	10.8
PPS	13.1	8.6	10.1	16.3	15.5
NICS Overall	14.0	11.4	13.4	13.1	14.7

4.7 Long-term Duration³

In 2023/2024, The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) had the longest average duration of long-term absence spells at 79.3 working days while the shortest average was 64.0 working days in DoF. Eight Departments showed an increase in average duration compared with 2022/2023; with only DoF and PPS reporting a decrease as shown in Table 9.

The most notable fluctuation was in TEO, where the average duration increased by 15.0 days to 64.3 days. Overall the long-term duration of absence spells in the NICS increased by 2.9 days.

Table 9

Long-term Duration by Department (2019/2020 to 2023/2024)²

Department	Long-term Duration (working days) 2019/2020	Long-term Duration (working days) 2020/2021	Long-term Duration (working days) 2021/2022	Long-term Duration (working days) 2022/2023	Long-term Duration (working days) 2023/2024
DAERA	67.1	66.4	63.5	68.2	71.7
DfC	59.6	61.4	60.0	63.0	66.6
DfE	54.5	59.7	60.1	65.7	68.6
DE	61.6	69.0	61.7	61.3	65.0
DoF	63.9	64.4	65.9	66.5	64.0
DoH	67.2	72.2	68.0	64.6	64.7
DfI	70.9	71.7	78.2	78.7	79.3
DoJ	62.7	62.6	63.5	61.9	67.6
TEO	55.0	92.9	60.3	49.4	64.3
PPS	60.1	55.0	59.3	68.3	66.3
NICS Overall	62.8	64.0	64.3	66.0	68.9

¹ Frequency Rate is the average number of long-term spells per employee, expressed as a percentage.

² Green text denotes a reduction from the previous financial year.

Red text denotes an increase from the previous financial year.

³ Throughout this report, the duration of absence relates only to days lost in the specific financial year.

CHAPTER 5

Absence Insight

5. ABSENCE INSIGHT

In 2023/2024 the average number of working days lost due to sickness absence rose to 13.8. This can be attributed to an increase in long-term absences. The top reason for long-term absence in 2023/2024 remains mental health¹ illnesses, accounting for 48.9% of long-term working days lost. The “Sickness Absence in the NICS 2016/2017” report provided insight into how mental health illness impacted the NICS, this chapter aims to provide an update on mental health illnesses in the NICS in 2023/2024.

Long-Term sickness absence increases

In 2016/2017 the average working days lost was 12.5. Fast forward to 2023/2024 this figure has increased to 13.8. In monetary terms this increase has cost the NICS an estimated extra £11.4 million and can largely be explained by the rise of long-term absence. Between 2016/2017 and 2023/2024 long-term absence increased by 1.94 working days, while short-term absences experienced a decrease of 0.58 working days over the same period. The percentage of working days lost due to long term absences increased from 76.1% in 2016/2017 to 82.6% in 2023/2024. The duration of long-term absences has also increased from 62.5 days (2016/2017) to 68.9 days (2023/2024). As stated above the main contributor to long-term absences remains to be mental health illnesses, which will be explored further below.

Grade Focus

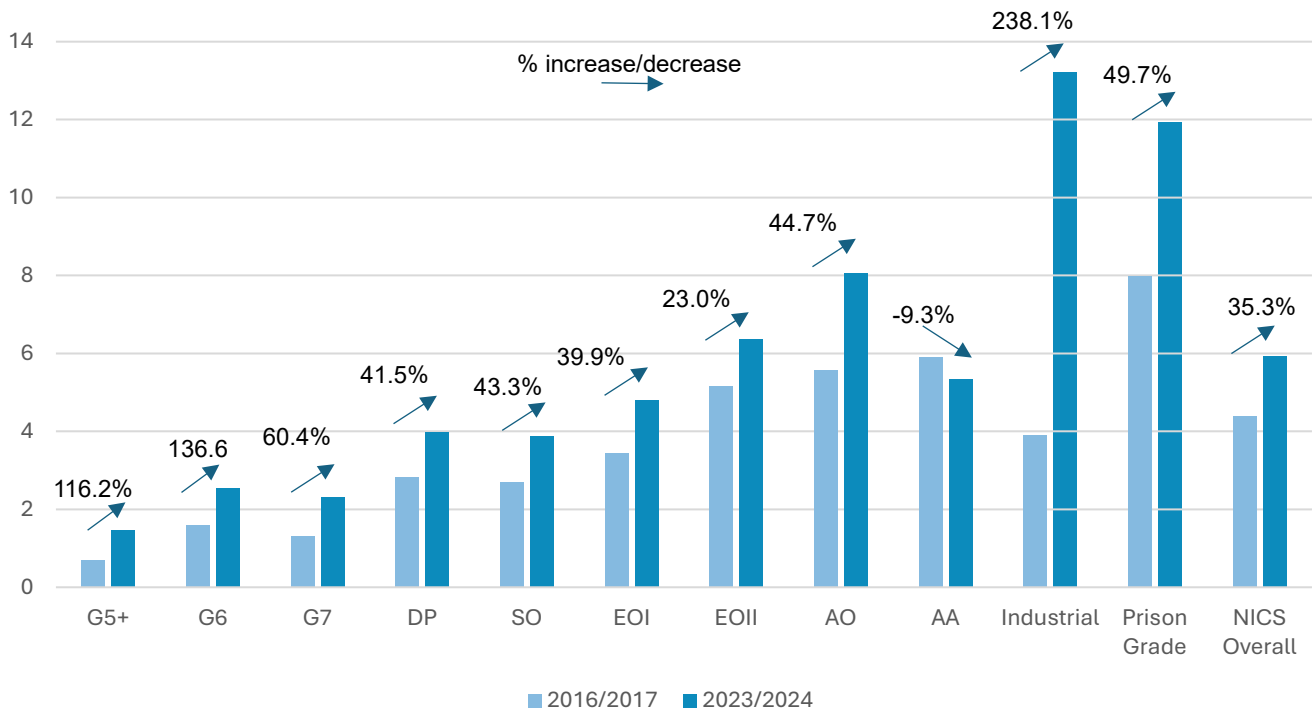
All grades experienced an increase in mental health illnesses between 2016/2017 and 2023/2024 with the exception of AA grades. As shown in Figure 21, the greatest percentage increase was seen at Industrial grade experiencing a 238.1% increase, from 3.9 working days lost in 2016/2017 to 13.2 working days lost in 2023/2024.

The greatest contributor to mental health in Industrial grades remains work related stress, accounting for 61.6% in 2023/2024, an increase of 14.9 percentage points from 2016/2017. In 2016/2017 depression was the second largest contributor to the overall mental health figure. However, by 2023/2024 depression had decreased by 17.7 percentage points and non-work-related stress replaced depression as the second largest contributor, accounting for 17.9% of the overall mental health absence. Although a large percentage point increase was experienced for Industrial staff it should be noted that Industrial staff account for only 2.8% of all NICS staff (2023/2024).

¹“Mental Health” refers to the sickness absence category Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses.

Figure 21

Working Days Lost per Staff Year due to Mental Health Illnesses by Analogous Grade Level



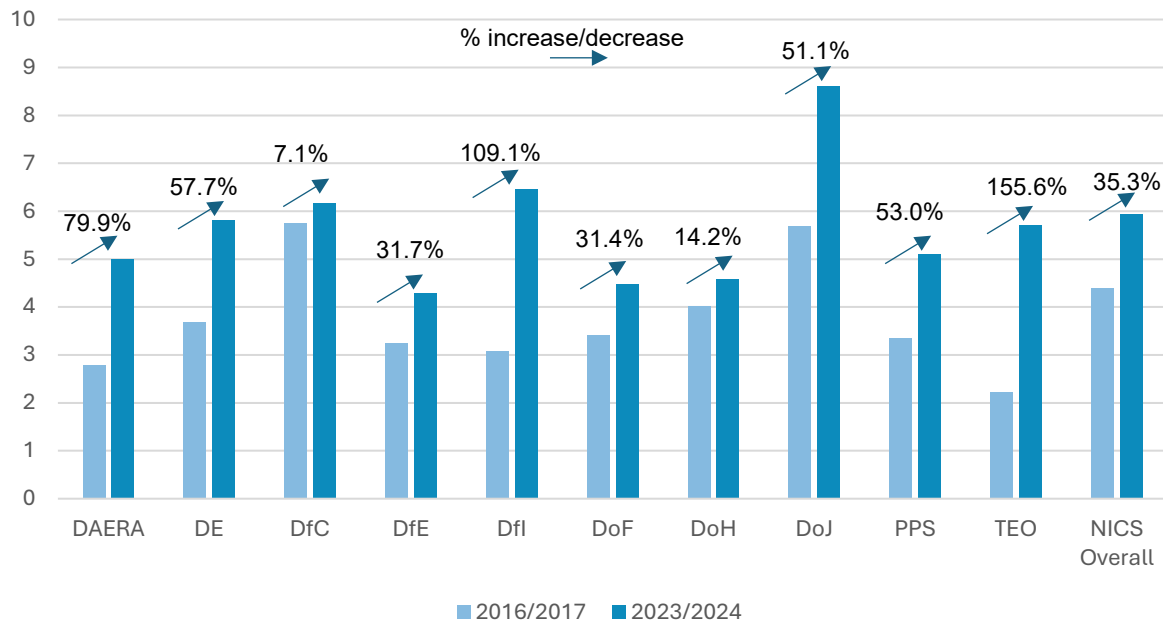
Departmental Focus

As shown in Figure 22 below, all departments have experienced an increase in mental health illnesses since 2016/2017. However, mental health absence trends have not always been consistent across departments. For example, between 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 DoF, DoH, DoJ and TEO all experienced a decrease in mental health absence, whilst in DAERA, DfE and DfI mental health sickness absence has been increasing since the pandemic (2020/2021).

Between 2016/2017 and 2023/2024 working days lost due to mental health illnesses in two departments more than doubled. There was a gradual increase from 3.1 to 6.5 in DfI however TEO experienced more fluctuation in its rise from 2.2 to 5.7. Work related stress was the largest contributor to the overall DfI and TEO mental health absence.

Figure 22

Working Days Lost per Staff Year due to Mental Health Illnesses by Department



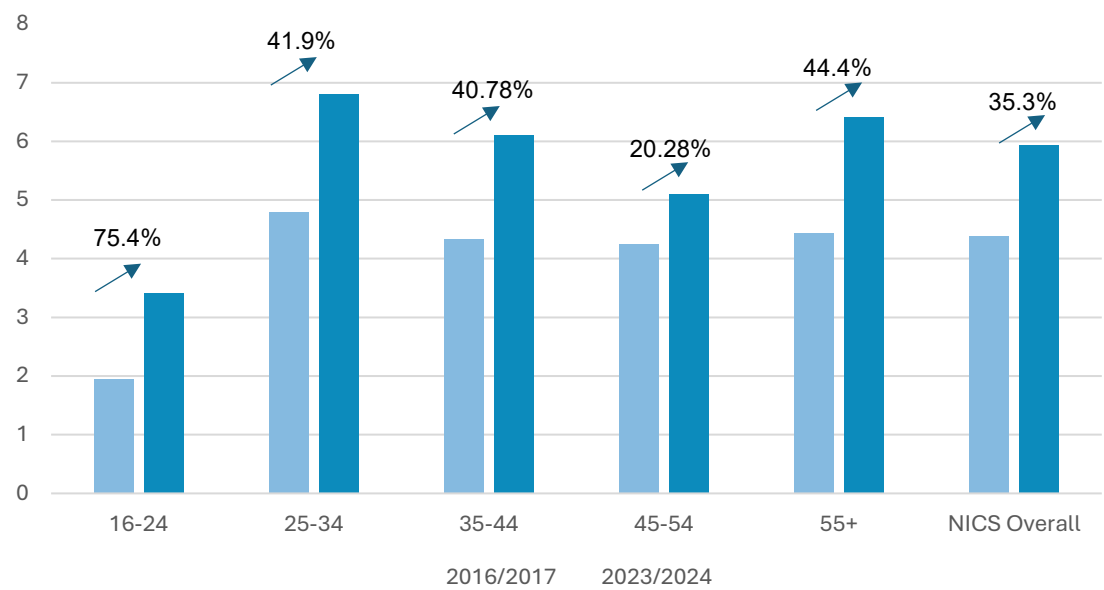
Age groups

All age groups experienced an increase in mental health illnesses since 2016/2017, however, the largest percentage increase was experienced in the 16-24 age group, as illustrated in Figure 23 below. Within the anxiety/stress/depression/other psychiatric illnesses category, work related stress accounted for 48% whilst non-work-related stress accounted for 52% of all mental health illnesses in 16–24-year-olds in 2016/2017. Fast forward to 2023/2024, this split has reversed with work related stress accounting for 65% and non-work-related stress accounting for 28.5% of all mental health absences in this age group². It should be noted however that although the proportion of 16-24 has increased it only accounted for 1.3% of all NICS staff.

² Other mental health sub reasons are depression – not pregnancy related and not specified.

Figure 23

Working Days Lost per Staff Year due to Mental Health Illnesses by Age Group



APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Calculations

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

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

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

$$\text{Spells per Staff Year} = \frac{\text{Number of Absence Spells}}{\text{Number of Staff Years}}$$

The "Working days lost per staff year" 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 the majority of people, a staff year is approximately **220** working days, 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' 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 all year (hence 1 staff year), and
- B. Worked Full-time for ½ year (hence ½ staff year)

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 are calculated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Total Number of working days lost} &= 30 \\ \text{Total Number of Staff Years} &= 1 + 0.5 = 1.5 \\ \text{Working Days Lost per Staff Year} &= \frac{30}{1.5} = 20 \end{aligned}$$

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

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Total Number of working days lost} &= 30 \\ \text{Total Number of People} &= 2 \\ \text{Working Days Lost per Person} &= \frac{30}{2} = 15 \end{aligned}$$

which overlooks the fact that one of the staff was only employed for six months.

Appendix 2: Links to other Organisations Sickness Absence Statistics

Comparisons with other Civil Service Sickness Absence Statistics/Local Councils

The Cabinet Office publish quarterly headline sickness absence statistics (on a rolling 12-month basis) in the form of a tabular report with no accompanying text or explanation. These quarterly reports provide headline absence figures broken down by geographical area, sex, age group and grade level. They can be found at [Cabinet Office absence data](#).

Headline figures since 1999 for the Home Civil Service overall are also published quarterly (on a rolling 12-month basis) along with some limited commentary and can be found at [Home Civil Service sickness absence](#). However, in-depth comparisons cannot be made as they do not publish figures beyond the headline rate. The headline figures would achieve a grade D on the 4 Nations Comparability Scale (Comparing Official Statistics Across the UK) 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, at [Scottish Government workforce information](#). They are produced on a “per staff year” basis.

The Welsh Government includes headline sickness absence figures in their annual Consolidated Accounts, available at [Welsh Government Consolidated Annual Accounts](#). They are produced on a “per staff year” basis also.

In the Republic of Ireland (RoI), sick leave statistics for the Public Service were published annually (on a calendar year basis) at [RoI Public Sick Leave Statistics](#). These are on a “per full-time equivalent” basis. RoI Civil Service ceased publishing sickness absence statistics in 2020.

The NI Audit Office publish a Local Government Auditor’s Report each year that includes information on sickness absence levels in the local councils. These are presented on a “per employee” basis and can be found at [Local Government Auditors Report](#).

Comparisons with the private sector

Across the wider labour market the Office for National Statistics undertakes a quarterly Labour Force survey that contains information on sickness absence. This report can be found at [ONS Sickness Absence in the Labour Market](#).

The CIPD also commission a Health and well-being at work survey each year that then reports on levels of sickness absence across the various UK labour market sectors. The most recently published report can be found at [CIPD Health and well-being at work](#).

Appendix 3: List of Abbreviations

<u>Abbreviation</u>	<u>Full Form</u>
AA	Administrative Assistant
AO	Administrative Officer
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
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
DVA	Driver and Vehicle Agency
EOI	Executive Officer I
EOII	Executive Officer II
FSNI	Forensic Science Northern Ireland
G5+	Grade 5 and above
G6	Grade 6
G7	Grade 7
G7+	Grade 7 and above
GB	Great Britain
HR	Human Resources
HSENI	Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland
LSA	Legal Services Agency of Northern Ireland
NI	Northern Ireland
NICS	Northern Ireland Civil Service
NICTS	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
NIEA	Northern Ireland Environment Agency
NIPS	Northern Ireland Prison Service
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
OAGNI	Office of the Attorney General Northern Ireland
ODS	OpenDocument Spreadsheet
OFMDfM	Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
PPS	Public Prosecution Service
ROI	Republic of Ireland
SO	Staff Officer
TEO	The Executive Office
YJA	Youth Justice Agency

Appendix 4: Business Area Analysis

Table 10: Business Area Analysis (Table 9.1 in the [Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service 2023/24 -Figures \(xlsx\)](#)).

Business Area	Working Days Lost per Staff Year 2023/2024
DAERA, NIEA	9.2
DoF, NISRA	8.3
DfI, DVA	21.5
DoJ, FSNI	9.8
DoJ, LSA	10.1
DoJ, NICTS	14.1
DoJ, NIPS	24.1
DoJ, YJA	25.0
HSENI	7.7