



**QUARTERLY SICKNESS ABSENCE IN THE
NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE
July 2020 - September 2020**

Experimental Statistics

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

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Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of all sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service between 1st July 2020 and 30th September 2020, as well as trend information for the previous four quarters. The statistics in this report are experimental statistics. The main findings are found below.

1) **Headline Figures**

The headline figure for the July 2020 - September 2020 quarter was 2.2 days (average days lost per staff year equivalent) an increase from 2.1 days in the previous quarter. This absence level is considerably lower than the level experienced during the same quarter in 2019 (3.1 days).

The 2.2 days lost per staff year equivalent represented 4.0% of the available working days in the July 2020 - September 2020 quarter, an increase on the 3.5% days lost in the previous quarter. In salary terms, this equated to an estimated £5.9 million of lost production. This is level with the cost of lost production in the previous quarter but a considerable decrease compared to the corresponding quarter in 2019 (£8.7 million).

For the second consecutive quarter over nine tenths (90.2%) of staff had no absence in the period. This is an improvement from the corresponding 2019 quarter in which 82.7% of staff had no recorded absence.

2) **Key Variable Trends**

The level of absence within Departments varied from 1.4 days for the Department of Education (DE) and Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to 3.1 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ). Most of the Departments recorded higher absence levels compared to the previous quarter while all departments, with the exception of The Executive Office (TEO), saw an improvement in absence levels compared to the corresponding quarter in 2019. The increased absence in the Department for Communities (DfC), over the quarter, had the greatest impact on the increase in overall absence level for the NICS.

The absence level for females (2.6 days) remained higher than that for males (1.8 days) with approximately a sixth 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 (45.6%) during the quarter. Within this category, work-related stress accounted for slightly over a quarter (27.3%) of the days lost while non work-related stress accounted for 35.4% of the days lost.

COVID-19 (Coronavirus) accounted for 0.08 working days lost per staff year equivalent in the quarter, which was the equivalent of 3.4% of all sickness absence days in the NICS for the period.

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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	Jul19- Sep19	Oct19- Dec19	Jan20- Mar20	Apr20- Jun20	Jul20- Sep20
Proportion of Staff with No Recorded Spells of Absence (%)	82.7	75.5	79.4	91.9	90.2
Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent¹	3.1	3.5	3.3	2.1	2.2
Percentage of Available Working Days² Lost (%)	5.9	6.2	5.7	3.5	4.0
Total Number of Working Days Lost	64,929	73,840	68,903	44,107	44,608
Estimated Lost Production³ (£ Million)	8.7	10.2	9.5	5.9	5.9
Average Number of Spells per Staff Year Equivalent	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1

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 first quarterly publication of sickness absence statistics. HRCS currently publish statistics on a financial year basis with the report issued in June each year. These statistics were designated as National Statistics by the UK Statistics Authority in 2019.

About this Report

This quarterly report provides a comprehensive analysis of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the July 2020 - September 2020 quarter as well as analyses over the previous four quarters.

Experimental Statistics

The statistics in this report are **Experimental Statistics**; these are statistics that are published in order to involve users and stakeholders in their development and as a means to improve value and relevance. Further detail can be found in Appendix 4.

We are currently considering the most appropriate method for analysing long-term sickness on a quarterly basis.

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 2.2 days to sickness absence in the July 2020 - September 2020 quarter - a slight increase from the previous quarter when staff lost 2.1 days and a considerable decrease from the corresponding quarter from the previous year (3.1 days).

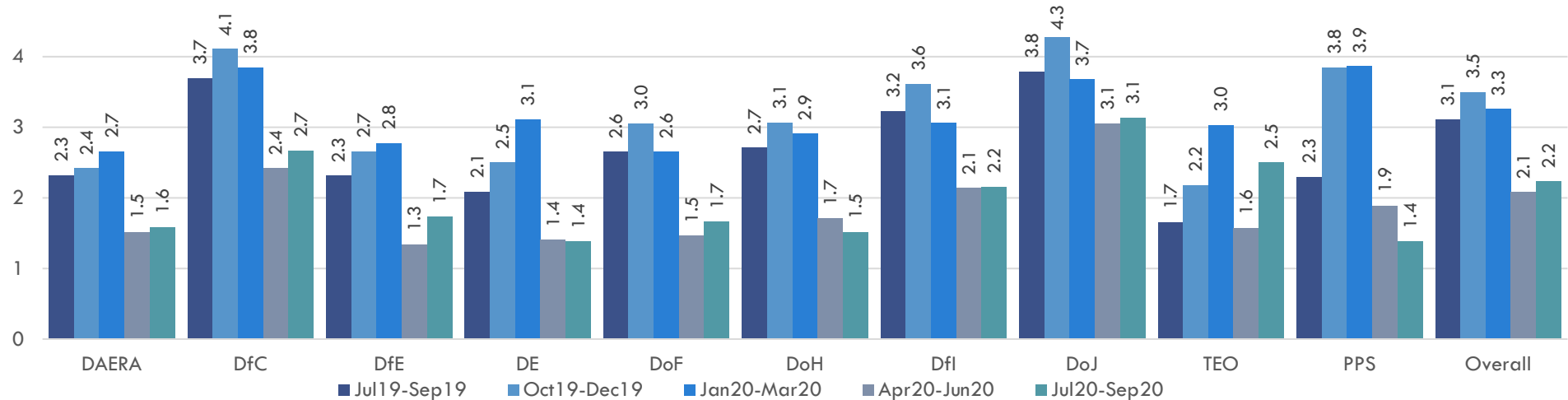
Of the three main measures of sickness absence, working days lost per staff year equivalent and the percentage of available working days lost saw slight increases from the previous quarter and estimated lost production remained static.



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Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Department

Figure 1: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Department¹: July 2019 to September 2020²



As shown in Figure 1, each department experienced a reduction in the average number of working days lost due to sickness absence from the January 2020 – March 2020 quarter to the April 2020 – June 2020 quarter.

The average number of working days lost in the July 2020 - September 2020 quarter ranged from 1.4 days for the Department of Education (DE) and Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to 3.1 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ). Each department, with the exception of The Executive Office (TEO), saw an improved absence level compared to the corresponding quarter in the previous year.

¹ A full list of Departmental abbreviations can be found in Appendix 3.

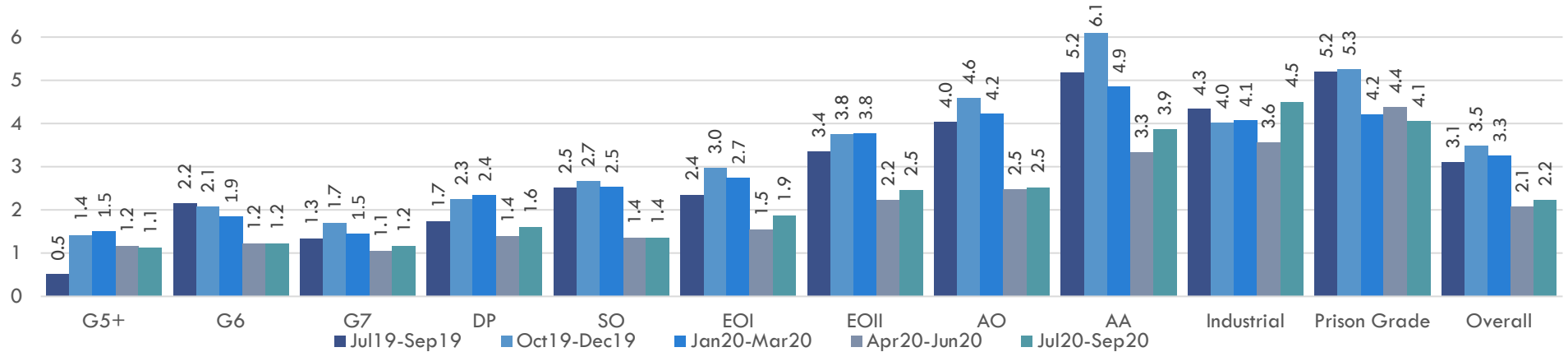
² While display figures were rounded to one decimal place, unrounded figures were used to calculate the bar heights in this chart.

Three Departments improved on their absence levels from last quarter - DE, Department of Health (DoH) and PPS, with PPS experiencing the greatest reduction in days lost. In terms of the other Departments, the Department for the Economy (DfE) and TEO saw notable increases.

Despite TEO experiencing the greatest increase in working days lost from last quarter, as it contains only 1.4% of NICS staff, it did not have a great impact on the overall increase in NICS absence. DfC, which contains 28.6% of NICS staff, had the greatest impact on the overall increase in absence level, contributing 44.7% to the small 0.1 day rise in NICS absence.

3 Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Grade Level

Figure 2: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Analogous Grade Level¹: July 2019 to September 2020²



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

As shown in Figure 2, all grade levels, with the exception of Prison Grade, experienced a reduction in absence levels from January 2020 – March 2020 to April 2020 – June 2020.

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 this quarter for analogous grade levels ranged from 1.1 days for staff at Grade 5+ level to 3.9 days for AA staff. Industrial staff lost the highest number of working days (4.5 days) followed by Prison Grade staff (4.1 days).

Two grade levels (G5+ and Prison Grade) reported an improvement compared with the previous quarter, with Prison Grade staff having the largest decrease in days lost. The greatest increase in days lost was seen in Industrial staff grades.

While encompassing just over one eighth of NICS staff (13.8%), EOI level staff had the biggest impact on the increase in the overall NICS absence level in the July 2020 - September 2020 quarter, contributing approximately one third to the rise in NICS absence.

¹ A full list of Analogous Grade abbreviations can be found in Appendix 3.

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 2019 to September 2020¹

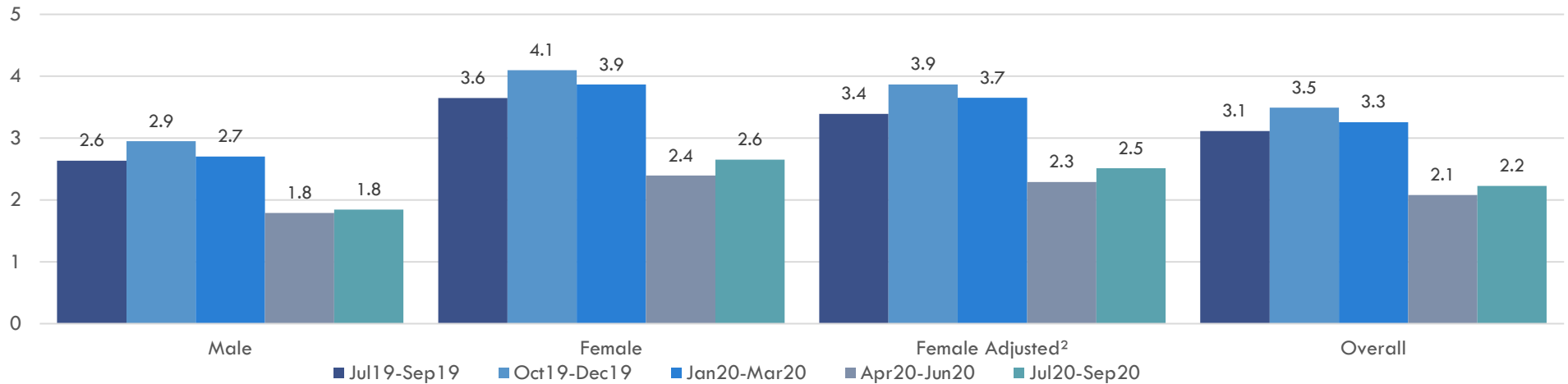


Figure 3 shows the absence level increased for males and females in the most recent quarter, with males experiencing an average of 1.8 days and females an average of 2.6 days.

Female staff have historically had a higher level of absence than males as shown in the previous quarters. In the July 2020 - September 2020 period this difference was 0.8 days, the size of the gap having increased by 0.2 of a day from 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 2.6 days to 2.5 days. If all gender-specific absences³ were excluded from the absence figures the difference between male and female absence would fall to 0.6 of a day (2.4 days for females and 1.8 days for males).

The rise in female absence had the greater impact on the overall NICS increase in absence, accounting for approximately 80% 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.

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 2019 to September 2020¹

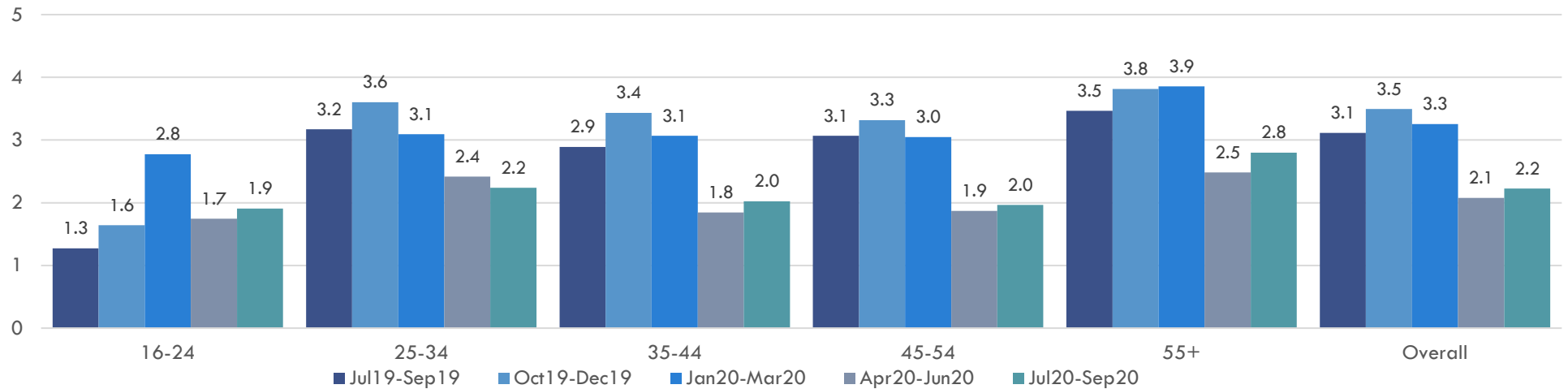


Figure 4 shows the average number of working days lost ranged from 1.9 days for staff aged 16-24 to 2.8 days for staff aged 55+. It should be noted that the youngest age group (16-24) accounted for less than 1% of NICS staff.

All age groups, with the exception of 16-24, saw an improved level of absence compared to the corresponding quarter in the previous year.

Staff in all age groups, other than those aged 25-34, experienced an increase in absence levels over the quarter, with those staff in the 55+ age group experiencing the largest increase.

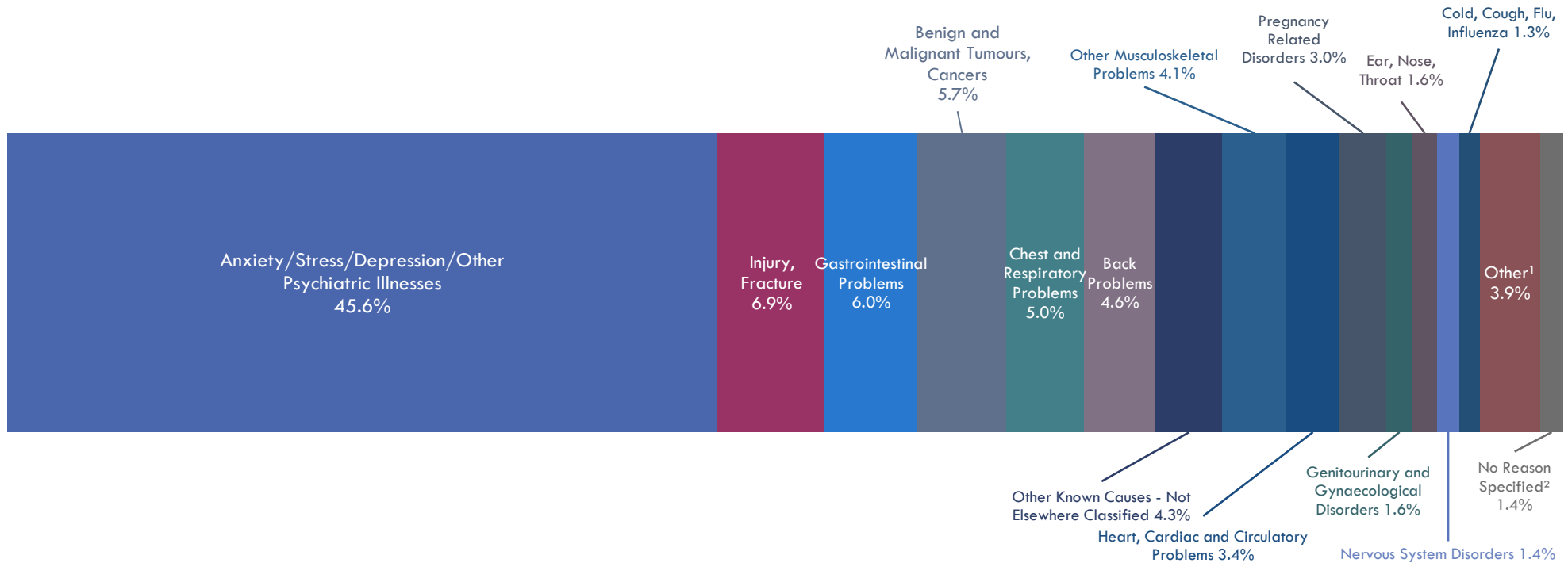
The increase experienced by staff aged 55+ had the biggest impact on overall increase of absence in the NICS, accounting for two thirds of the NICS increase.

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 2020 - September 2020 quarter.

Figure 5: Percentage of Working Days Lost by Reason: July 2020 to September 2020



Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses remains the reason behind the largest proportion of working days lost. Figure 5 shows this reason accounted for 45.6% of the total 2.2 working days lost in the quarter. Over one quarter (27.3%) of the working days lost in this illness category were recorded as work-related stress while 35.4% were recorded as non work-related stress.

Absences due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) were recorded under the Chest and Respiratory Problems category which accounted for 5.0% of the total 2.2 working days lost in the quarter. COVID-19 accounted for 3.4% of all sickness absence days in the NICS for the July 2020 - September 2020 quarter.

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.

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Reasons for Sickness Absence: Spells of Absence

Figure 6: Percentage of Sickness Absence Spells by Reason: July 2020 to September 2020

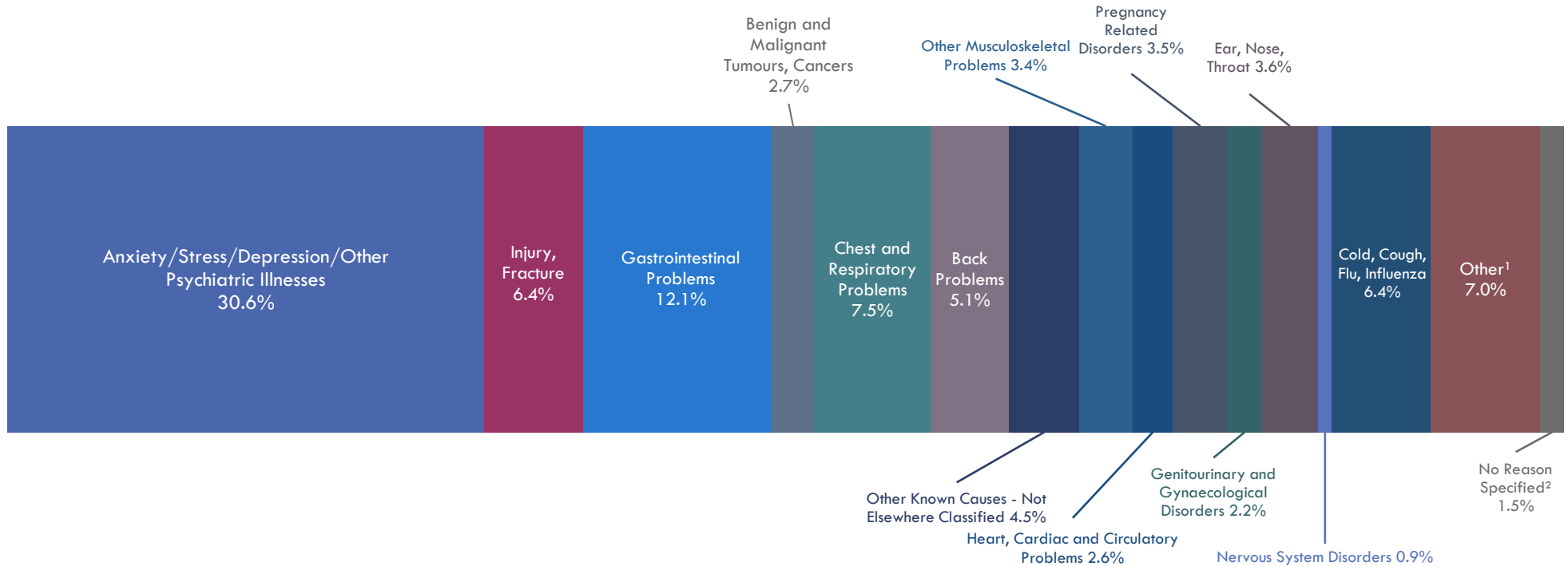


Figure 6 shows absences due to Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses were also responsible for the greatest number of absence spells (30.6%) in the quarter. The rise in instances of these illnesses was responsible for approximately 75% of the small 0.1 day increase in NICS absence from the previous quarter.

Absences due to Gastrointestinal Problems and Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza were responsible for a combined 18.5% of absence spells in this quarter but since these illnesses tend to be short-term in nature they were only responsible for 7.3% 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.

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. $(\text{Number of Working Days Lost} / \text{Number of Available Working Days}) \times 100$
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 63 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 - 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 4 - Experimental Statistics

This report provides analysis of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the July 2020 - September 2020 quarter as well as analyses over the previous four quarters. 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 the UK Statistics Authority in 2019. The same methods and processes are used to produce this report as the National Statistic, applied to a quarterly rather than an annual dataset.

HRCS received user feedback indicating the need for absence statistics to be published on a quarterly basis. Based on this feedback, HRCS liaised with users to develop a new quarterly publication. This process is still ongoing and the release of July 2020 - September 2020 quarterly information as Experimental Statistics allows users to be further involved in the content development of future quarterly absence reports. This does not mean the statistics are of a low quality, but it does signify that the statistics are new and the content is still being developed.

The intention is that these new quarterly statistics will be released three times a year (September, December, March) with the annual report still being published in June. HRCS welcome feedback from users on whether they find this quarterly report to be helpful. Please email hrcsabsence@finance-ni.gov.uk regarding whether you would like to see an ongoing quarterly release of sickness absence information and whether there is a particular area of interest not covered.

HRCS plans to have these statistics assessed against the Code of Practice for Statistics which is required for all Official Statistics and also to gain National Statistics status.