

QUARTERLY SICKNESS ABSENCE IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE

An overview of Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) for the quarter April 2023 - June 2023

Published by: Human Resource Consultancy Services, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Theme: Government

Coverage: Northern Ireland

Frequency: Quarterly

Contact: Eimear McKee

Email: hrcsabsence@finance-ni.gov.uk

Publication Date: 12 September 2023

Executive Summary

- The headline figure for the April 2023 - June 2023 quarter was 3.0 days (average days lost per staff year equivalent), a decrease from 3.2 days in the previous quarter. This absence level is an increase on the level experienced during the same quarter in 2022 (2.8 days).
- The 3.0 days lost per staff year represented 5.6% of the available working days in the April 2023 - June 2023 quarter, equivalent to the percentage of working days lost in the previous quarter. In salary terms, this equated to an estimated £9.7 million of direct salary cost. This is a decrease on the estimated direct salary cost in the previous quarter (£10.3 million) and an increase on the corresponding quarter in 2022 (£8.8 million).
- During the April 2023 - June 2023 quarter 84.5% of staff had no absence, an increase from the previous quarter. The average number of spells per staff year equivalent was 0.2 spells which is equal to the previous quarter.
- The level of absence within departments varied from 2.3 days for the Department of Finance (DoF) to 3.9 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ). The majority of departments experienced a decrease in absence levels compared to the previous quarter. The decrease in absence in the Department for Communities (DfC), over the quarter, had the greatest impact on the 0.2 day decrease in the overall absence level for the NICS.
- The absence level for females (3.2 days) remained higher than that for males (2.8 days) with approximately a third of this difference being due to pregnancy related disorders.
- Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses was the absence reason that accounted for the greatest proportion of working days lost (42.2%) during the quarter. Within this category, non work-related stress accounted for 33.3% of the days lost while work-related stress also accounted for 33.3%.

Key Facts

The Table below displays trend information for some key measures of sickness absence in the NICS over the last five quarters ¹.

Key Facts	Apr22- Jun22	Jul22- Sep22	Oct22- Dec22	Jan23- Mar23	Apr23- Jun23
Proportion of Staff with No Recorded Spells of Sickness Absence (%)	85.3	85.0	78.8	81.6	84.5
Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent²	2.8	3.0	3.3	3.2	3.0
Percentage of Available Working Days³ Lost (%)	5.2	5.8	6.0	5.6	5.6
Total Number of Working Days Lost	62,674	67,292	75,065	72,456	68,293
Estimated Direct Salary Cost⁴ (£ Million)	8.8	9.3	10.6	10.3	9.7
Average Number of Spells per Staff Year Equivalent	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2

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. Between 18 July 2022 and 9 October 2022, the first 5 calendar days of an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as paid special leave. From 10 October 2022, an absence attributed to COVID-19 was recorded as sickness absence. Subsequently caution should be taken when reading trend information.

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

³ Available Working Days refers to any day on which an employee was expected to be at work. See Appendix 2 for more information.

⁴ Any information provided in this report that relates to estimated 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.

CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
Executive Summary	1
Key Facts	2
1. Introduction	4
2. Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence	5
Department	6
Grade Level	7
Gender	8
Age Group	9
3. Reasons for Sickness Absence	10
Working Days Lost	10
Spells of Absence	11
Appendix 1 - Calculations	12
Appendix 2 - Definitions	13
Appendix 3 - Departmental Analysis	14
Appendix 4 - Abbreviations	15
Appendix 5 - National Statistics	16

All media enquiries should be directed to DoF Press Office

Telephone: 028 9081 6724 or 028 9081 6895

Further information can be obtained from:

Eimear McKee

NISRA Human Resource Consultancy Services

Colby House

Belfast, BT9 5RR

Telephone: 028 9038 8441

Email: hrcsabsence@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](#).

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

1

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. Alongside these quarterly publications, 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 April 2023 - June 2023 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 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@nisra.gov.uk.

2

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.

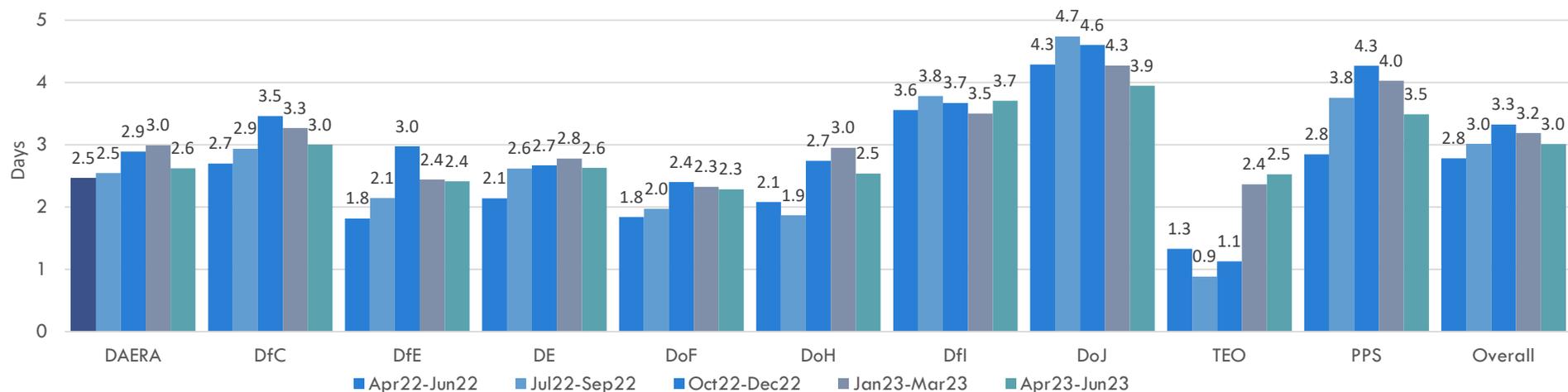
Staff in the NICS lost an average of 3.0 days to sickness absence in the April 2023 - June 2023 quarter - a decrease from the previous quarter when staff lost 3.2 days and an increase on the corresponding quarter in 2022 (2.8 days).

Two of the main measures of sickness absence - working days lost per staff year and estimated direct salary cost - saw a decrease when compared to the previous quarter, while the percentage of available working days lost remained the same.



2 Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Department

Figure 1: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Department^{1,2}: April 2022 to June 2023³



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 [2023 Personnel Report](#).

The average number of working days lost in the April 2023 - June 2023 quarter ranged from 2.3 days for the Department of Finance (DoF) to 3.9 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ). The majority of departments experienced a decrease in absence levels compared to the previous quarter.

The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) saw the largest decrease in absence levels compared to the previous quarter; a decrease of 0.5 days. As PPS contains 1.8% of all NICS staff, this decrease contributed only 5.8% to the overall 0.2 day fall in absence levels.

As the Department for Communities (DfC) contains 29.7% of NICS staff the decrease in this department had the greatest impact; contributing 49.5% to the 0.2 day fall in the overall NICS figure.

¹ A Departmental analysis by Industrial and Non-Industrial Staff can be found in Appendix 3.

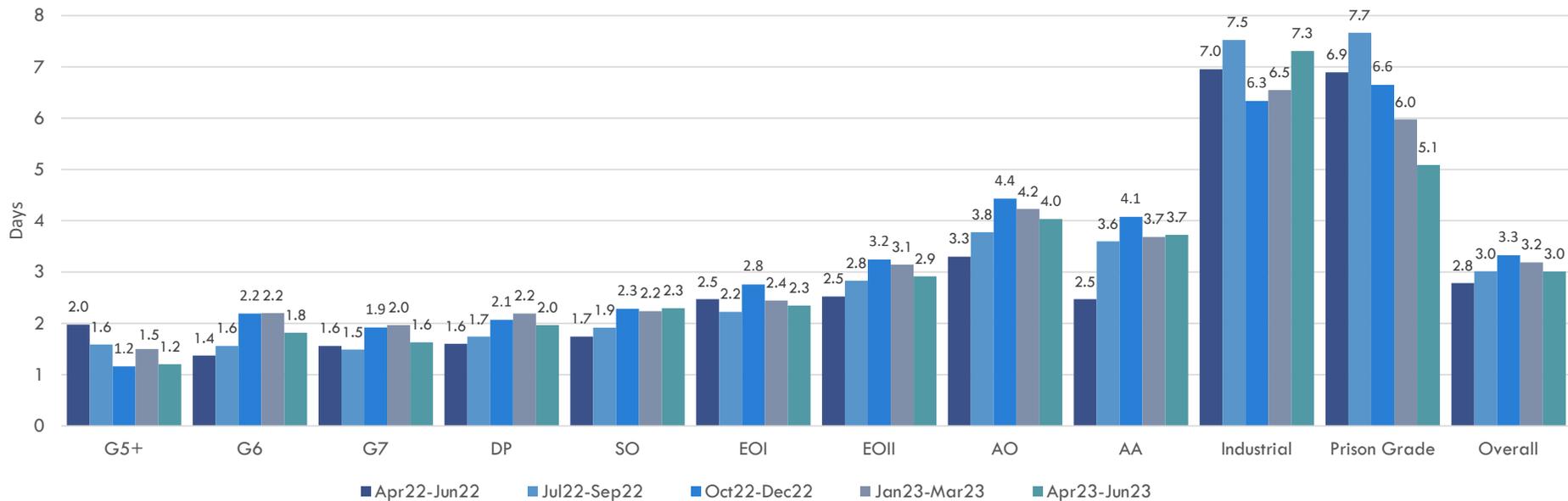
² A full list of Departmental abbreviations can be found in Appendix 4.

³ While display figures were rounded to one decimal place, unrounded figures were used to calculate the bar heights in this chart. This may result in bars with the same display figure differing in height. See the ODS tables for the unrounded figures.

2

Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Grade Level

Figure 2: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Analogous Grade Level¹: April 2022 to June 2023²



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 April 2023 - June 2023 quarter for analogous grade levels ranged from 1.2 days for staff at Grade 5+ level to 4.0 days for AO staff. Industrial staff lost the highest number of working days (7.3 days) followed by Prison Grade staff (5.1 days).

The majority of analogous grade levels reported decreased absence levels compared with the previous quarter, with G6 staff experiencing a decrease of 0.4 days.

Encompassing 21.5% of NICS staff, AO level staff had the biggest impact on the decrease in the overall NICS absence level in the April 2023 - June 2023 quarter, contributing 30.1% of the 0.2 day fall.

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. This may result in bars with the same display figure differing in height. See the ODS tables for the unrounded figures.

2

Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Gender

Figure 3: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Gender: April 2022 to June 2023¹

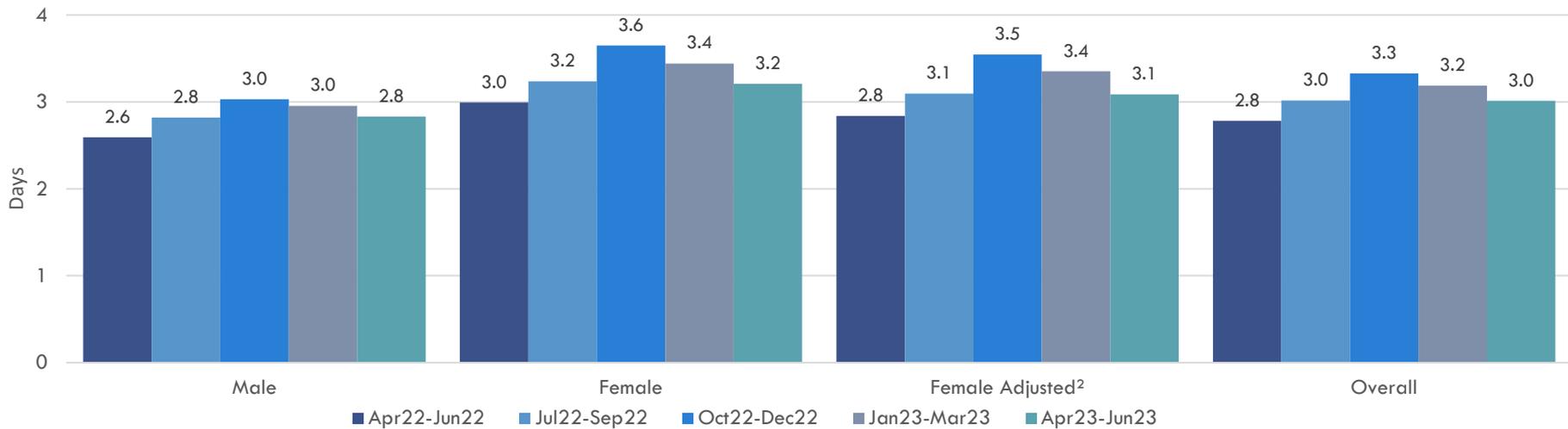


Figure 3 shows both males and females experienced a decrease in absence level in the April 2023 - June 2023 quarter compared to the previous quarter.

Female staff have historically had a higher level of absence than males as shown in the previous quarters. In the April 2023 - June 2023 period this difference was 0.4 days, similar 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 3.2 days to 3.1 days, as shown in Figure 3. If all gender-specific absences³ were excluded from the absence figures the difference between male and female absence would fall to 0.1 days (2.9 days for females and 2.8 days for males).

The decrease in female absence had the greater impact on the 0.2 day fall in NICS absence, accounting for 64.0% of the decrease.

¹ While display figures were rounded to one decimal place, unrounded figures were used to calculate the bar heights in this chart. This may result in bars with the same display figure differing in height. See the ODS tables for the unrounded figures.

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*.

2 Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Age Group

Figure 4: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Age Group: April 2022 to June 2023¹

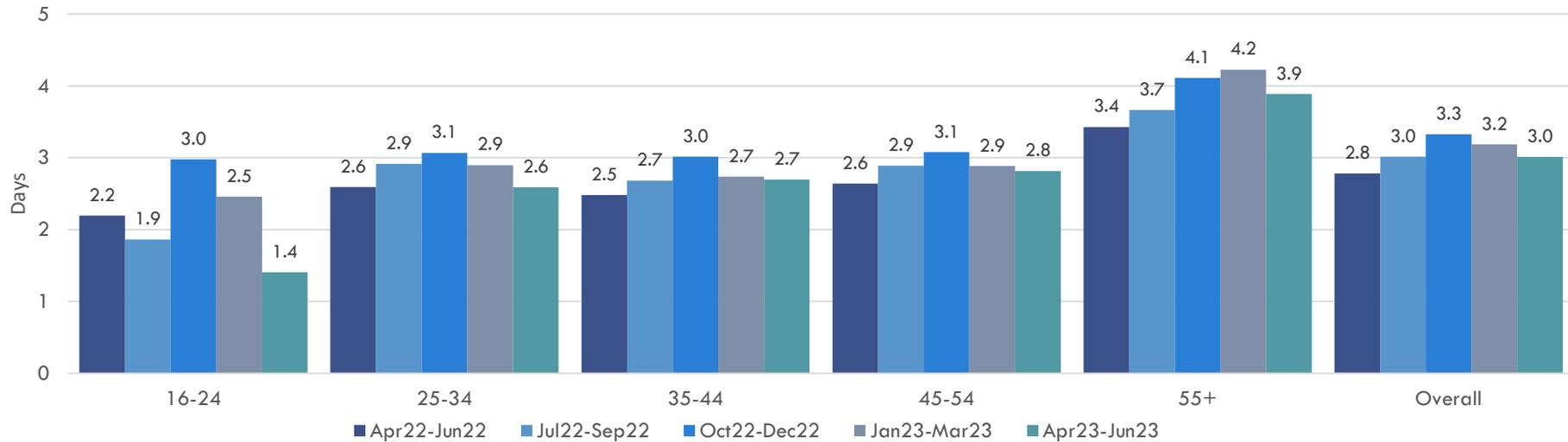


Figure 4 shows the average number of working days lost ranged from 1.4 days for staff aged 16-24 to 3.9 days for staff aged 55+.

All age groups saw decreased absence levels compared to the previous quarter aside from staff aged 35-44 which has stayed the same.

Staff in the 16-24 age group experienced the largest decrease in days lost per staff year. However, as this age group contains just 1.6% of NICS staff, it only had a small impact on the overall absence level.

The largest contributor to the 0.2 day decrease was the 55+ age group, which comprises 26.4% of NICS staff and accounted for 47.1% of the increase.

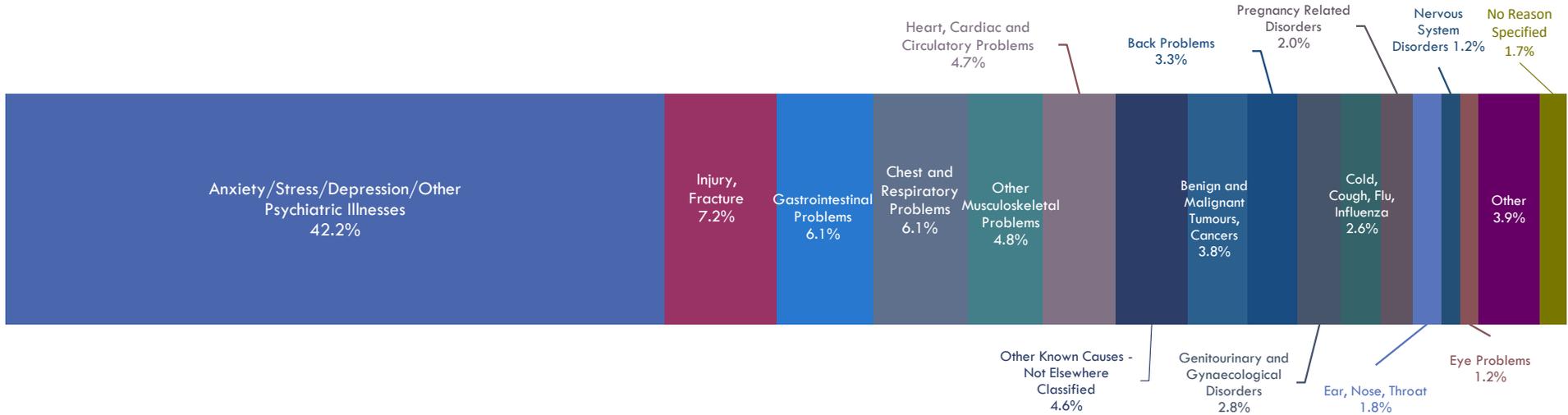
¹ While display figures were rounded to one decimal place, unrounded figures were used to calculate the bar heights in this chart. This may result in bars with the same display figure differing in height. See the ODS tables for the unrounded figures.

3

Reasons for Sickness Absence: Working Days Lost

This chapter looks at the reasons for sickness absence during the April 2023 - June 2023 quarter.

Figure 5: Percentage of Working Days Lost by Reason: April 2023 to June 2023^{1,2,3,4}



Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses remains the reason behind the largest proportion of working days lost. Figure 5 shows this reason accounted for 42.2% of the total 3.0 working days lost per staff year in the quarter. Non work-related stress was responsible for 33.3% of the working days lost in this illness category, while 33.3% were recorded as work-related stress.

Absences due to COVID-19 were recorded under the Chest and Respiratory Problems category, which accounted for 6.1% of all working days lost in the quarter.

COVID-19 represented 48.5% of all days lost to Chest and Respiratory and accounted for 3.0% (0.09 days) of all sickness absence days for the April 2023 - June 2023 quarter. In comparison, in the previous quarter, COVID-19 accounted for 3.9% (0.12 days) of all NICS sickness absence days.

The decrease in absences recorded under Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza had the biggest impact on the 0.2 day decrease in absence from the previous quarter, contributing 66.2% of this fall. The decrease in absences recorded under Chest and Respiratory Problems had the second biggest impact on the 0.2 day fall.

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.

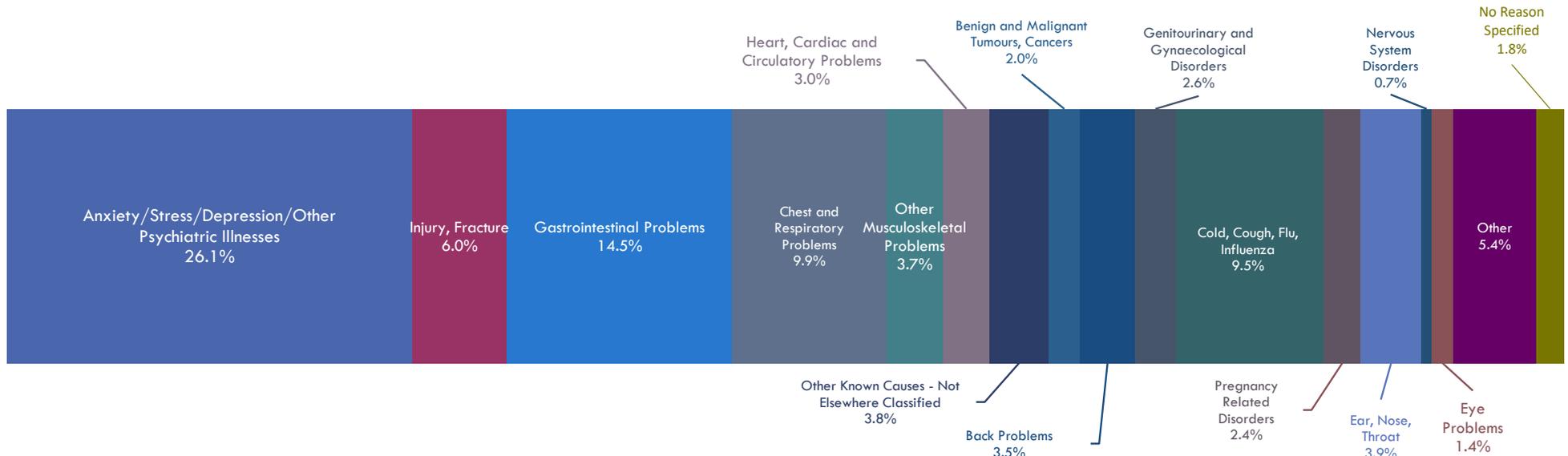
³ Comparison data for the previous four quarters can be found in the corresponding ODS tables.

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

3

Reasons for Sickness Absence: Spells of Absence

Figure 6: Percentage of Sickness Absence Spells by Reason: April 2022 to June 2023^{1,2,3,4}



The average number of sickness absence spells in the April 2023 - June 2023 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 (26.1%) in the quarter. This is an increase from the previous quarter in which they accounted for 20.4% of all absence spells.

Absences due to Chest and Respiratory Problems were responsible for 9.9% of absence spells, a decrease from the previous quarter in which they accounted for 11.9% of all absence spells.

Absences due to Gastrointestinal Problems and Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza were responsible for a combined 24.0% of absence spells in this quarter but since these illnesses tend to be short-term in nature they were only responsible for 8.7% 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.

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

Appendix 1 - Calculations

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

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

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

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

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 2 - 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 Direct Salary Cost (£)	Estimated Direct Salary Cost was previously referred to as 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 3: Departmental Analysis: Industrial, Non-Industrial and Prison Grade^{1,2}

Department	Working Days Lost per SYE Apr22-Jun22	Working Days Lost per SYE Jul22-Sep22	Working Days Lost per SYE Oct22-Dec22	Working Days Lost per SYE Jan23-Mar23	Working Days Lost per SYE Apr23-Jun23
DAERA	2.5	2.5	2.9	3.0	2.6
DAERA Industrial	3.6	4.1	3.9	4.5	4.2
DAERA Non-Industrial	2.4	2.5	2.8	2.9	2.5
DfC	2.7	2.9	3.5	3.3	3.0
DfC Industrial	6.3	10.5	4.9	3.6	5.5
DfC Non-Industrial	2.7	2.9	3.5	3.3	3.0
DfE	1.8	2.1	3.0	2.4	2.4
DE	2.1	2.6	2.7	2.8	2.6
DoF	1.8	2.0	2.4	2.3	2.3
DoF Industrial	10.2	8.1	8.8	9.2	6.4
DoF Non-Industrial	1.8	2.0	2.4	2.3	2.3
DoH	2.1	1.9	2.7	3.0	2.5
DfI	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.5	3.7
DfI Industrial	8.2	8.6	7.3	7.5	8.6
DfI Non-Industrial	2.6	2.8	3.0	2.7	2.8
DoJ	4.3	4.7	4.6	4.3	3.9
DoJ Industrial	5.4	7.0	6.7	4.1	6.5
DoJ Non-Industrial	2.5	2.8	3.2	3.2	3.1
DoJ Prison Grade	6.9	7.7	6.6	6.0	5.1
TEO	1.3	0.9	1.1	2.4	2.5
PPS	2.8	3.8	4.3	4.0	3.5
NICS	2.8	3.0	3.3	3.2	3.0
NICS Industrial	7.0	7.5	6.3	6.5	7.3
NICS Non-Industrial	2.4	2.6	3.0	2.9	2.7
NICS Prison Grade	6.9	7.7	6.6	6.0	5.1

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 [2023 Personnel Report](#).

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

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 April 2023 - June 2023 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@nisra.gov.uk regarding whether there is a particular area of interest not covered.