



**QUARTERLY SICKNESS ABSENCE IN THE
NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE
October 2020 - December 2020**

Experimental Statistics

CONTENTS

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

All media enquiries should be directed to DoF Press Office

Telephone: 028 9081 6724 or 028 9081 6895

Further statistical information can be obtained from:

Danielle Clarke

NISRA Human Resource Consultancy Services

Colby House

Belfast, BT9 5RR

Telephone: 028 9038 8442

Email: danielle.clarke@nisra.gov.uk

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

1 Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of all sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service between 1st October 2020 and 31st December 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 October 2020 - December 2020 quarter was 2.7 days (average days lost per staff year equivalent) an increase from 2.2 days in the previous quarter. This absence level is considerably lower than the level experienced during the same quarter in 2019 (3.5 days). The 2.7 days lost per staff year equivalent represented 4.9% of the available working days in the October 2020 - December 2020 quarter, an increase on the 4.0% days lost in the previous quarter. In salary terms, this equated to an estimated £7.8 million of lost production. This is an increase on the cost of lost production in the previous quarter but a decrease compared to the corresponding quarter in 2019 (£10.2 million). Nearly nine tenths (87.2%) of staff had no absence in the period, a slight decrease from the previous quarter. However, this is an improvement on the corresponding 2019 quarter in which 75.5% of staff had no recorded absence.

2) **Key Variable Trends**

The level of absence within departments varied from 1.7 days for the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to 3.6 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ). All departments aside from The Executive Office (TEO) recorded higher absence levels compared to the previous quarter while every department 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 (3.1 days) remained higher than that for males (2.3 days) with approximately a fifth 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 (42.7%) during the quarter. Within this category, work-related stress accounted for nearly a third (31.4%) of the days lost while non work-related stress accounted for 31.0% of the days lost.

COVID-19 (Coronavirus) accounted for 0.27 working days lost per staff year equivalent in the quarter, which was the equivalent of 10.3% of all sickness absence days in the NICS for the period. This is an increase on the previous quarter with COVID-19 accounting for 3.4% of all sickness absence days.

1

Executive Summary: Key Facts

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

Key Facts	Oct19- Dec19	Jan20- Mar20	Apr20- Jun20	Jul20- Sep20	Oct20- Dec20
Proportion of Staff with No Recorded Spells of Absence (%)	75.5	79.4	91.9	90.2	87.2
Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent¹	3.5	3.3	2.1	2.2	2.7
Percentage of Available Working Days² Lost (%)	6.2	5.7	3.5	4.0	4.9
Total Number of Working Days Lost	73,840	68,903	44,107	44,608	56,472
Estimated Lost Production³ (£ Million)	10.2	9.5	5.9	5.9	7.8
Average Number of Spells per Staff Year Equivalent	0.3	0.2	0.1	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 second 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 October 2020 - December 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 5.

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 2.7 days to sickness absence in the October 2020 - December 2020 quarter - an increase from the previous quarter when staff lost 2.2 days and a decrease from the corresponding quarter for the previous year (3.5 days).

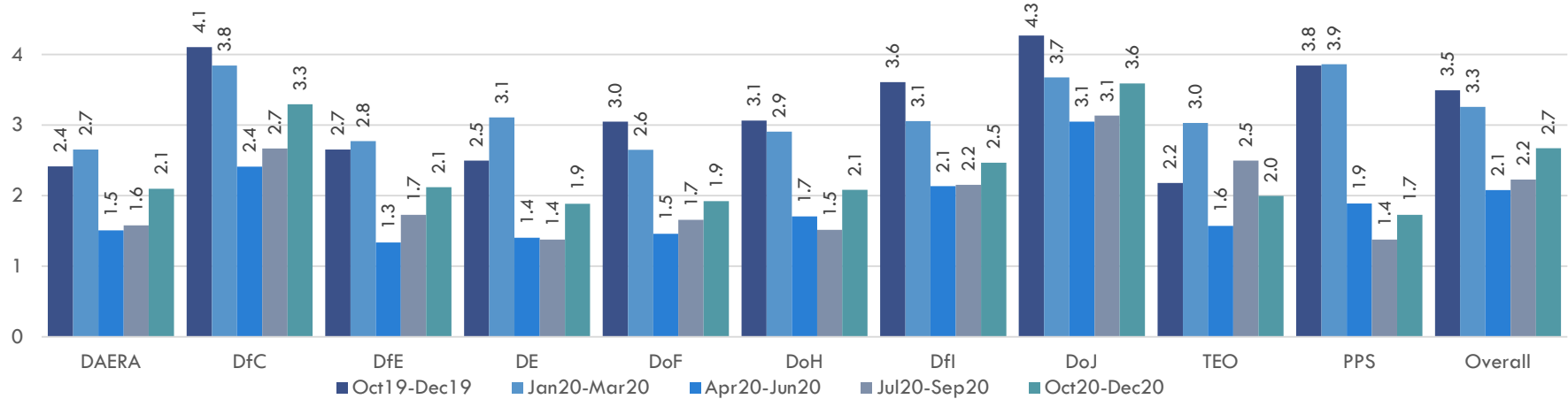
All three main measures of sickness absence - working days lost per staff year, the percentage of available working days lost and estimated lost production - saw an increase when compared with the previous quarter.



3

Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Department

Figure 1: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Department¹: October 2019 to December 2020²



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 [2020 Personnel Report](#).

The average number of working days lost in the October 2020 - December 2020 quarter ranged from 1.7 days for the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to 3.6 days for the Department of Justice (DoJ). Each department saw an improvement in absence levels compared to the corresponding quarter in the previous year.

The Executive Office (TEO) was the only department to improve on their absence levels from the previous quarter. Every other department experienced an increase in absence with the Department for Communities (DfC) seeing the largest increase.

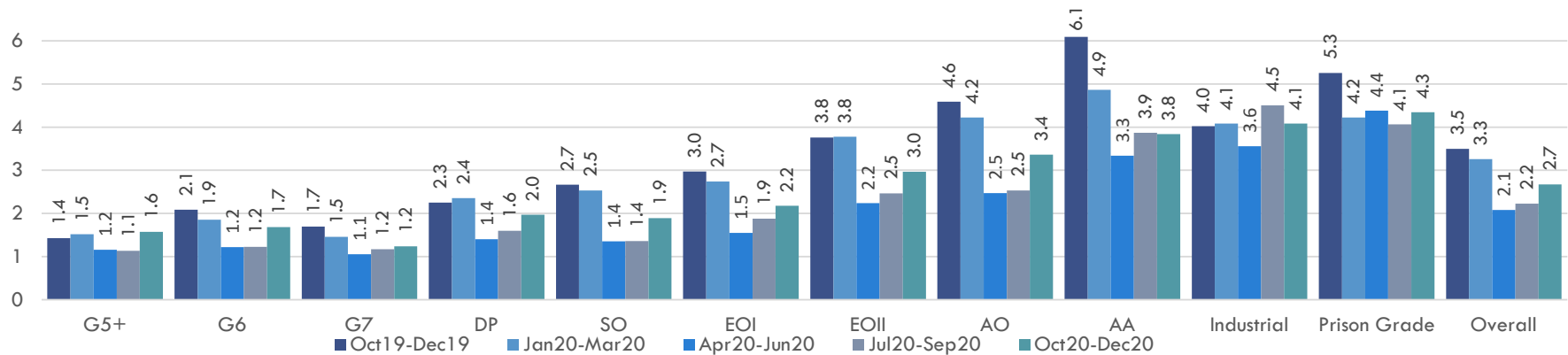
As DfC contains 28.6% of NICS staff, it had the greatest impact on the overall increase in NICS absence, contributing 40.2% of the 0.5 day rise.

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

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

3 Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Grade Level

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



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 this quarter for analogous grade levels ranged from 1.2 days for staff at Grade 7 level to 3.8 days for AA staff. Prison Grade staff lost the highest number of working days (4.3 days) followed by Industrial staff (4.1 days).

Two grade levels (AA and Industrial staff) reported an improvement compared with the previous quarter, with Industrial staff having the largest decrease in days lost. The greatest increase in days lost was seen at AO level.

Encompassing over one fifth of NICS staff (21.5%), AO level staff had the biggest impact on the increase in the overall NICS absence level in the October 2020 - December 2020 quarter, contributing nearly 40% to the rise in NICS absence.

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

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

3 Working Days Lost Through Sickness Absence: Gender

Figure 3: Working Days Lost per Staff Year Equivalent by Gender: October 2019 to December 2020¹

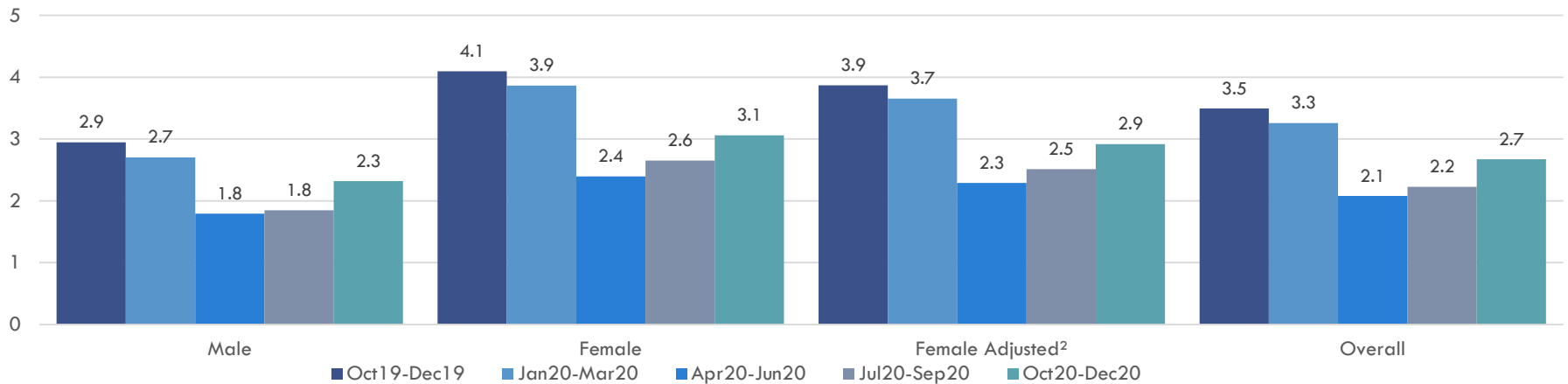


Figure 3 shows the absence level increased for males and females in the most recent quarter, with males experiencing an average of 2.3 days and females an average of 3.1 days.

Female staff have historically had a higher level of absence than males as shown in the previous quarters. In the October 2020 - December 2020 period this difference was 0.8 days, equivalent 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 3.1 days to 2.9 days. If all gender-specific absences³ were excluded from the absence figures the difference between male and female absence would fall to 0.5 of a day (2.8 days for females and 2.3 days for males).

The rise in male absence had the greater impact on the overall NICS increase in absence, accounting for 54.3% 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: October 2019 to December 2020¹

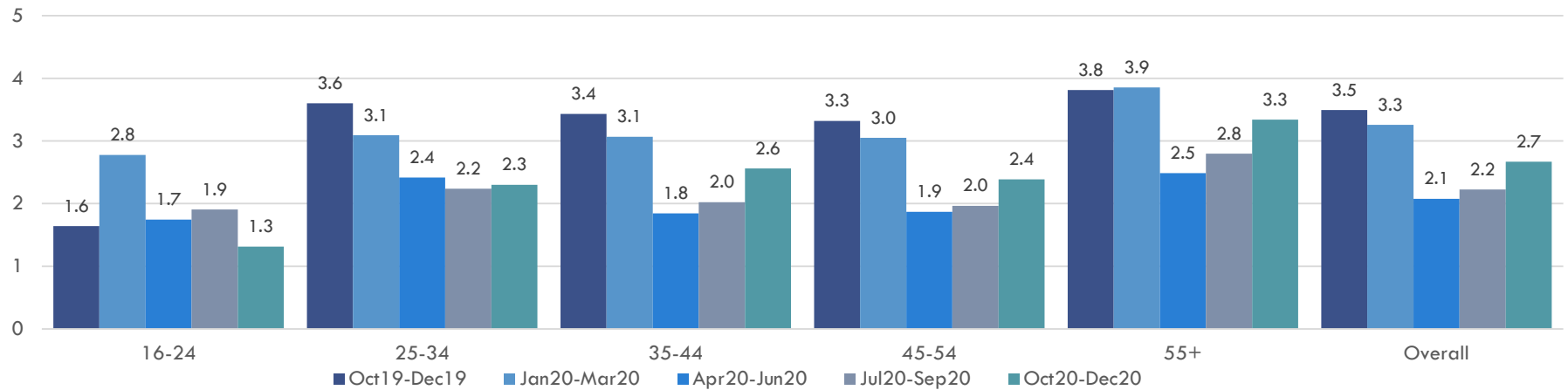


Figure 4 shows the average number of working days lost ranged from 1.3 days for staff aged 16-24 to 3.3 days for staff aged 55+.

All age groups saw an improved level of absence compared to the corresponding quarter in the previous year.

The 16-24 category was the only age group to experience a decrease in absence levels. However, it should be noted that this age group accounted for less than 1% of NICS staff.

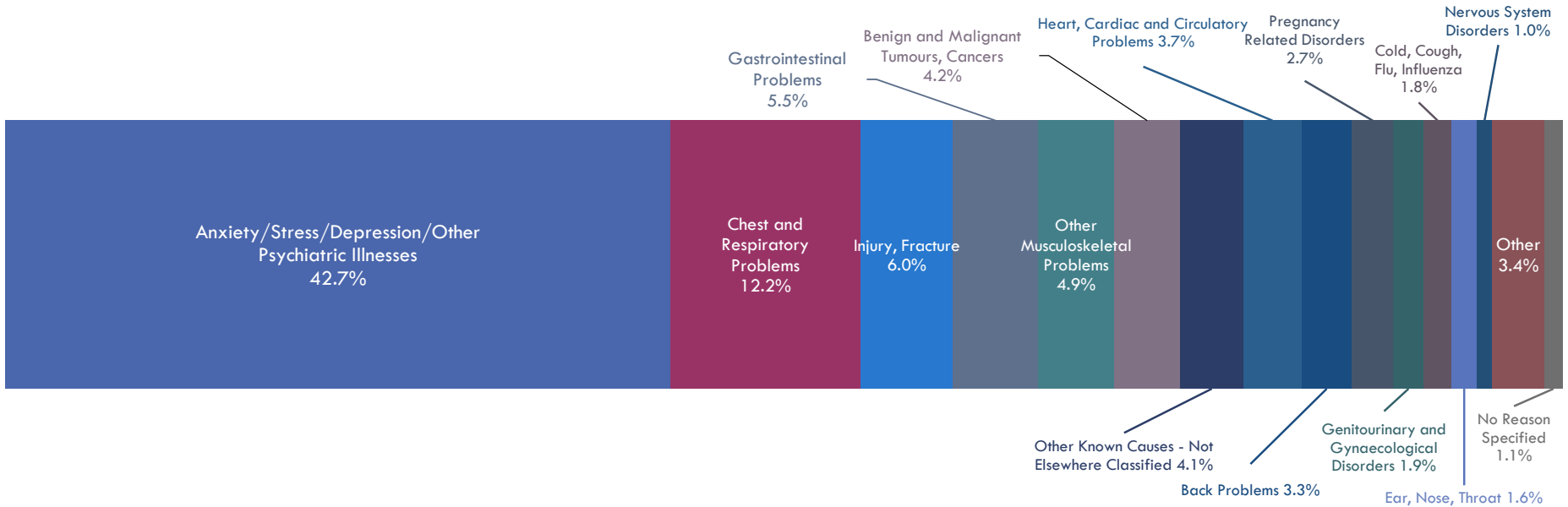
Staff in the 35-44 age group experienced the largest increase which had the biggest impact on the overall increase in NICS absence levels, accounting for 38% of the rise.

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

4 | Reasons for Sickness Absence: Working Days Lost

This chapter looks at the reasons for sickness absence during the October 2020 - December 2020 quarter.

Figure 5: Percentage of Working Days Lost by Reason: October 2020 to December 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 42.7% of the total 2.7 working days lost in the quarter. Nearly one third (31.4%) of the working days lost in this illness category were recorded as work-related stress while 31.0% 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 12.2% of the total 2.7 working days lost in the quarter.

COVID-19 represented 84% of all days lost to Chest and Respiratory and accounted for 10.3% (0.27 days) of all sickness absence days for the October 2020 - December 2020 quarter. In comparison, in the July 2020 - September 2020 quarter, COVID-19 represented 67.5% of all days lost to Chest and Respiratory Problems and accounted for 3.4% (0.08 days) of all NICS sickness absence days.

The increase of absences recorded under Chest and Respiratory Problems accounted for nearly 50% of the rise in absence from the previous 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.

4

Reasons for Sickness Absence: Spells of Absence

Figure 6: Percentage of Sickness Absence Spells by Reason: October 2020 to December 2020

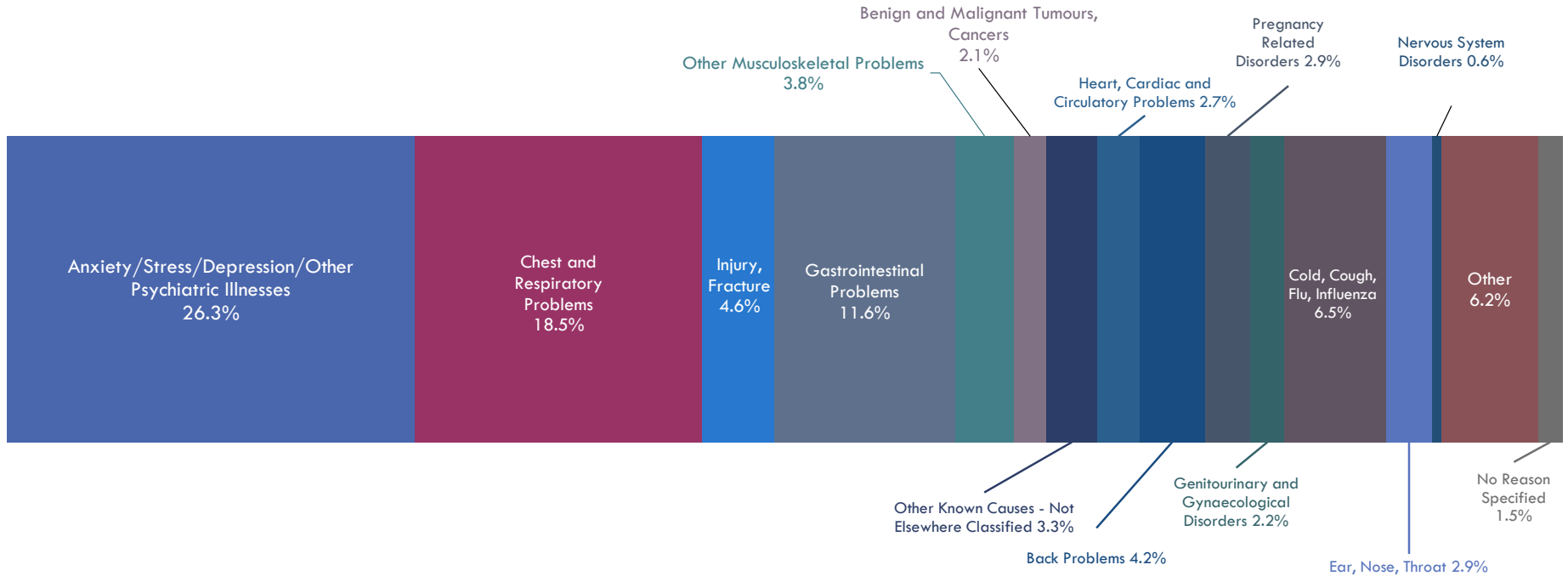


Figure 6 shows absences due to Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses were also responsible for the greatest number of absence spells (26.3%) in the quarter. The rise in instances of these illnesses were responsible for approximately 28% of the 0.5 day increase in NICS absence from the previous quarter, while Chest and Respiratory Problems accounted for 48.5% of the rise.

Absences due to Gastrointestinal Problems and Cold, Cough, Flu, Influenza were responsible for a combined 18.1% 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: Departmental Analysis: Industrial, Non-Industrial and Prison Grade¹

Department	Working Days Lost per SYE Oct19-Dec19	Working Days Lost per SYE Jan20-Mar20	Working Days Lost per SYE Apr20-Jun20	Working Days Lost per SYE Jul20-Sep20	Working Days Lost per SYE Oct20-Dec20
DAERA	2.4	2.7	1.5	1.6	2.1
DAERA Industrial	1.0	1.5	1.7	2.3	3.6
DAERA Non-Industrial	2.5	2.7	1.5	1.5	2.0
DfC	4.1	3.8	2.4	2.7	3.3
DfC Industrial	5.3	4.2	0.0	1.0	1.6
DfC Non-Industrial	4.1	3.8	2.4	2.7	3.3
DfE	2.7	2.8	1.3	1.7	2.1
DE	2.5	3.1	1.4	1.4	1.9
DoF	3.0	2.6	1.5	1.7	1.9
DoF Industrial	2.6	2.0	0.0	3.2	0.5
DoF Non-Industrial	3.0	2.7	1.5	1.7	1.9
DoH	3.1	2.9	1.7	1.5	2.1
Dfl	3.6	3.1	2.1	2.2	2.5
Dfl Industrial	5.0	5.0	4.3	5.3	4.3
Dfl Non-Industrial	3.3	2.6	1.6	1.4	2.0
DoJ	4.3	3.7	3.1	3.1	3.6
DoJ Industrial	3.5	3.8	6.4	8.3	6.5
DoJ Non-Industrial	3.5	3.3	2.0	2.4	3.0
DoJ Prison Grade	5.3	4.2	4.4	4.1	4.3
TEO	2.2	3.0	1.6	2.5	2.0
PPS	3.8	3.9	1.9	1.4	1.7
NICS	3.5	3.3	2.1	2.2	2.7
NICS Industrial	4.0	4.1	3.6	4.5	4.1
NICS Non-Industrial	3.3	3.2	1.9	2.0	2.5
NICS Prison Grade	5.3	4.2	4.4	4.1	4.3

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 [2020 Personnel Report](#).

Appendix 4 - Abbreviations

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

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

Appendix 5 - Experimental Statistics

This report provides analysis of sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the October 2020 - December 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 October 2020 - December 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. It should be noted that the current report has been expanded to incorporate additional information resulting from user feedback on the first publication.

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.