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# **SICKNESS ABSENCE IN THE DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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In 2007/08 DRD lost an average of 9.0 working days per staff member as a result of sickness absence. This cost the Department an estimated £1.8m. This paper provides an analysis of sickness absence levels within DRD and compares these to the overall performance of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. In addition, comparisons with the Public Sector in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland Government are also provided.

Research Papers are compiled for the benefit of Members of The Assembly and their personal staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

## SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

### SECTION 1 – SICKNESS ABSENCE IN DRD AND NICS 2007/08

- DRD lost an average of **9.0 working days per staff member** as a result of sickness absence (Target: 8.8 days). This amounts to an estimated £1.8m in cost. In the NICS **12.9 working days were lost** (Target: 9.5 days) which amounted to a cost of £24.5m.
- Non industrial units of DRD lost fewer days than **Northern Ireland Water** (11.3). **Roads Service lost more days** (9.1) **than the DRD core**. (8.3)
- **AA grades** recorded the highest number of days lost in DRD. In the NICS AO grades recorded the highest number of days lost.
- **Females lost a higher number of days than males in DRD and the NICS.**
- **Staff in the 16-24 and 55 and over age group lost the highest** number of days in DRD. This was comparable to NICS.
- 59% of staff recorded **no spells of sickness** absence during 2007/08 compared to 43.1% in the NICS.
- The **majority of absence spells** in DRD (over 73%) lasted for 5 working days or less. These spells however, only account for 20.4% of the total working days lost.
- In contrast, **absences lasting for more than 20 days** accounted for only 11.5% of absence spells but almost 62% of the total days lost.
- **Psychiatric/Psychological illnesses** accounted for the largest proportion of working days lost at 25% at DRD. This trend was true for NICS.
- **Viral/Bacterial Infections** accounted for the largest proportion of absence spells (27.3%) in DRD. This trend was also true for the NICS (30.7%).
- The **average duration of particular illnesses** within DRD ranged from 3.5 working days for viral/bacterial infections to 29.7 days for psychiatric/psychological illnesses.
- In DRD, 7.3% of staff recorded one or more periods of **long term absence** which accounted for 61.7% of the total working days lost. In the NICS as a whole, 11.4% of staff recorded one or more spells of long term absence. This accounted for 69.4% of the total working days lost.
- Psychiatric/Psychological illnesses (34%) accounted for the highest proportion of the **working days lost on a long term basis in DRD**. This was true also for the civil service as a whole. (39.5%).
- DRD missed its **target on total days lost** by 1.8%. **The NICS missed this target by 14.8%.**
- DRD missed its **targets on frequency of long term illnesses** by 7.9%. Overall, the NICS missed this by 9.9%.

- DRD missed its target on **duration of long term illnesses by 15.2%**. The NICS missed it by **27.1%**.
- **DRD achieved its target on the frequency of short term illnesses as did all of the NICS departments.**

### **SECTION 2 – ABSENCE LEVELS IN GB**

- **Sickness levels are 36% higher in the Northern Ireland Civil Service than in Great Britain departments.**
- In 2007/08, the average number of days lost in GB was 9.3 days. This is compared to 12.9 days in NICS.
- On average, Northern Ireland Civil Service **absences lasted more than twice as long** as in GB across the whole range of illnesses, both short and long term.
- Whilst it is true for both NICS and GB departments that women take more absence days than men, **rates of female sickness in NICS are almost double the rate in GB.**

### **SECTION 3 – ABSENCE LEVELS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND**

- The **levels of sickness are broadly comparable** between the NICS and the Irish Government.
- An **investigation into the high levels of sickness** absence is underway by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

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## Section 1: Sickness Absence in the DRD and NICS

### 1.1 – DRD KEY FACTS

In 2007/08, 9.0 working days per staff member were lost through sickness. (Target 8.8 days)

Roads Service lost more days (9.1) per staff year than the DRD Core (8.3 days). Northern Ireland Water lost the most days at 11.3 days.

AA grades recorded the highest number of days lost (13.3 days).

Females recorded a higher number of days lost (13.2 days) than males (7.1 days).

Staff aged 16-24 and those over 55 lost the highest number of days (12.9).

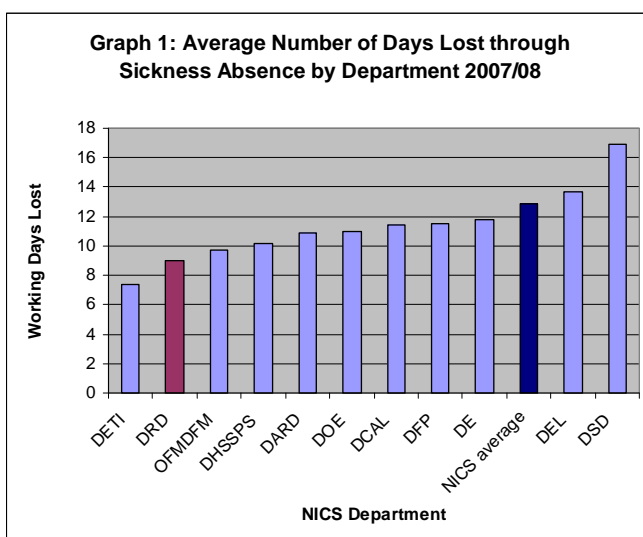
The majority of absence spells in DRD (over 73%) lasted for 5 working days or less. These spells only accounted for only 20.4% of total working days lost.

Absence spells lasting for more than 20 consecutive days accounted for only 11.5% of absence spells but almost 62% of the total days lost.

Psychiatric/Psychological illnesses accounted for the largest proportion of working days lost at 25%.

### 1.2 - TOTAL WORKING DAYS LOST

In 2007/08 DRD lost an average of 9.0 working days per staff member as a result of sickness absence (Target: 8.8 days). In pay bill terms, this amounts to an estimated £1.8m.<sup>1</sup> By comparison, 12.9 days were lost by staff year in the NICS which amounted to a cost of £24.5m (Target: 9.5 days).<sup>2</sup>



Graph 1 shows that DRD performed favourably against other NICS departments.

There has been a downward trend in average number of days lost recorded for both DRD and the NICS since 2003/4.

It is important to note however, that levels of absence are very much dependent upon the personnel make up of the individual departments and the duration of sickness absence as later analysis shall demonstrate.

<sup>1</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in DRD 2007/08*, pg 4.

<sup>2</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in the NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 9.

Research suggests that higher levels of absence are also associated with factors in the workplace such as organisational change, role uncertainty and high work demands. The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) concluded that there are indications that many of these factors are present in the NICS and are not being adequately addressed and that there needed to be work undertaken to ensure an *attendance culture* within the workplace.<sup>3</sup>

DRD narrowly missed its target in this area of 8.8 days by 1.8%. The NICS as a whole missed its target of 9.5 days by 14.8%.<sup>4</sup> Only 2 of the 11 departments (DETI and DCAL) actually achieved their targets in this area.<sup>5</sup> For further information on targets see section 2.9.

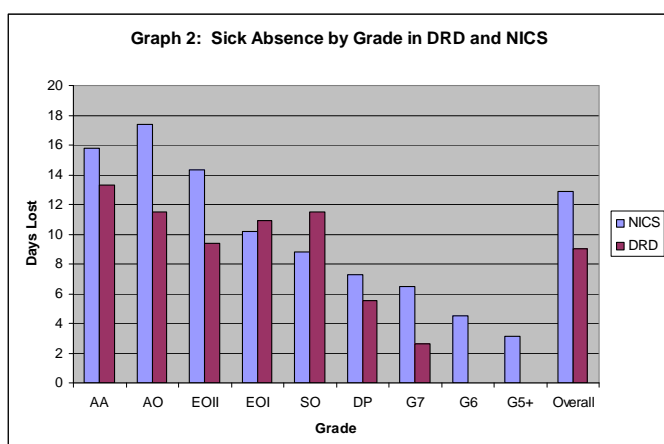
### **1.3 - ABSENCE BY BUSINESS AREA**

Within DRD, the Core Unit recorded 8.3 days lost per staff year and Roads Service recorded 9.1 days.<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland Water (NIW) lost the most days recording 11.3 days per staff year.

The core unit has made considerable progress in reducing the total number of days lost from 15 days in 2001/02. Similarly DRD Roads Service has reduced the number of days from 11.2 in 2001/02.<sup>7</sup>

NIW have confirmed that 11.3 days were lost per staff year in 2007/08.<sup>8</sup> This is considerably higher than the non-industrial DRD units. The NIW Annual Report states that reasons for these high levels of absence include a large number of ill health retirements delayed by complex pension arrangements and the Voluntary Redundancy Programme which resulted in high levels of absences due to stress.<sup>9</sup>

### **1.4 - ABSENCE BY GRADE**



In DRD, the highest number of days lost were recorded by Administrative Assistant (AA) grades at 13.3 days. Those at Grade 7 or above lost the fewest days.<sup>10</sup> In comparison, as with previous years in the NICS, absence levels were highest for AO graded staff and ranged from 12.4 days in DETI to 27.1 days in OFMDFM.<sup>11</sup>

*Note: DRD G7 figure equates to G7 and above.*

<sup>3</sup> NIAO, *Managing Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service*, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2008.

<sup>4</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in the NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in DRD 2007/08*, pg 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Northern Ireland Water, Correspondence with Researcher, 21.04.09.

<sup>9</sup> Northern Ireland Water, *Annual Report 2007/08*, pg 117.

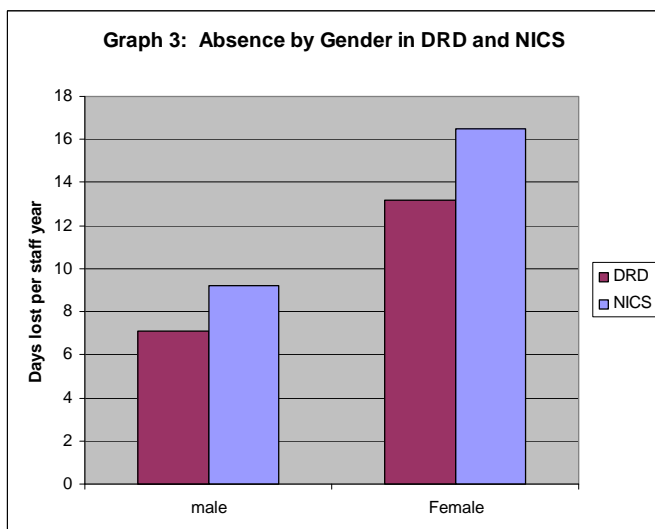
<sup>10</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in DRD 2007/08*, pg 6.

<sup>11</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 11.

Unlike the NICS where there was a general downward trend in absences as the grade increased, relatively high absence rates were recorded in the DRD Staff Officer and Executive Officer categories.

### **1.5 - ABSENCE BY GENDER**

**In DRD, females lost a higher number of days than males, losing on average 13.2 days compared to 7.1 days.<sup>12</sup> This was true also for the NICS as a whole.**

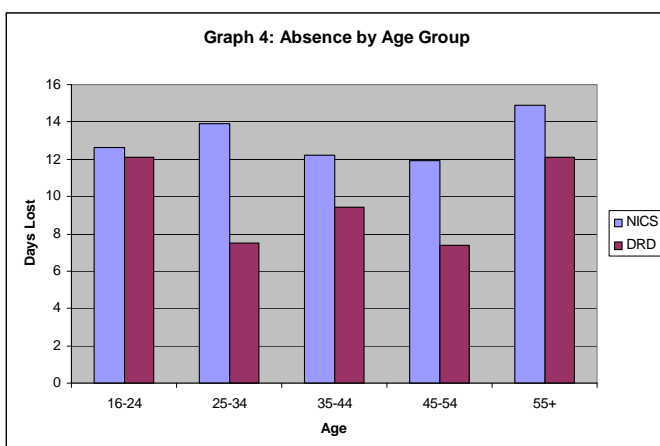


Research suggests that higher absence rates in females may be as a result of pregnancy and post natal illnesses as well as their societal role of primary carers and lower average grades.<sup>13</sup>

However, even when pregnancy and postnatal illnesses were taken into account, females lost on average 10.9 days per staff year in DRD.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.6 - ABSENCE BY AGE GROUP**

**In DRD, staff in the 16-24 group and the 55 over age group lost the highest number of days at 12.9. Staff aged 45-54, lost the fewest at 7.4 days.<sup>15</sup> This trend was broadly comparable to the NICS as a whole.**



In the NICS, staff in the 55 and over category lost the highest number of days recording an average of 14.9 days lost. The lowest number of days were lost by those aged 45-54.<sup>16</sup>

A relatively high number of 16-24 year olds record high levels of absence in DRD.

<sup>12</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in DRD 2007/08*, pg 7.

<sup>13</sup> NIAO, *Management of Sickness Absence in the NI Civil Service*, 2008. pg 21.

<sup>14</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in DRD 2007/08*, pg 7.

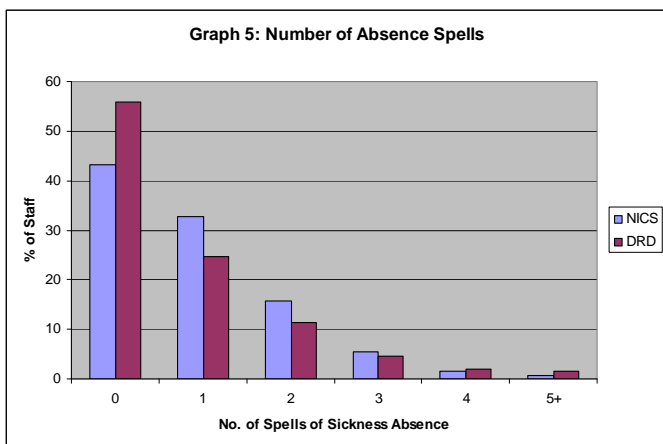
<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pg 8.

<sup>16</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 13.

## 1.7 - SPELLS AND DURATION OF SICKNESS ABSENCE

It is important to consider spells of absence in two ways. Firstly, the total number of spells and secondly, the duration of each spell.

**In DRD, 59% of staff recorded no spells of sickness absence during 2007/08<sup>17</sup> compared to 43.1% in the NICS.<sup>18</sup>**



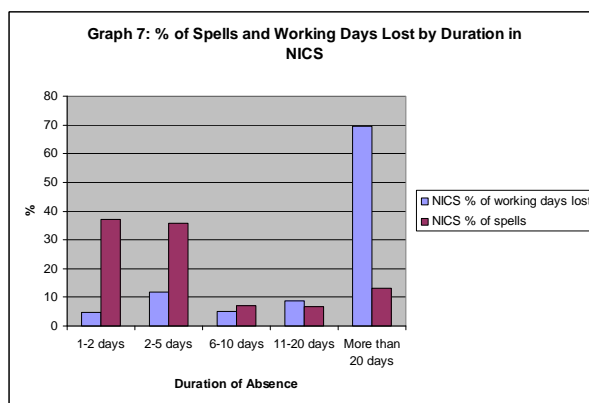
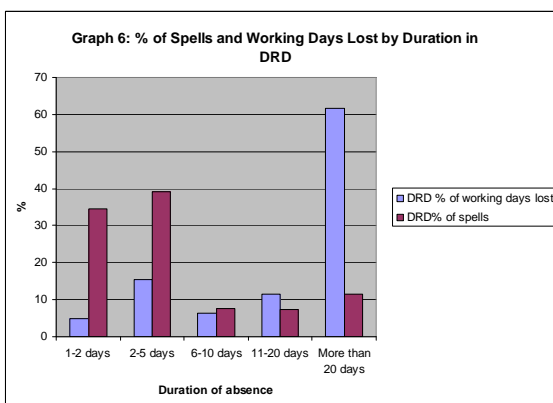
Graph 5 opposite shows that DRD outperformed the NICS as a whole in terms of the number of staff recording no spells of sickness.

However, a slightly higher % of staff in DRD recorded 4 and 5+ absence spells.

**Graph 6 shows that the majority of absence spells in DRD (over 73%) lasted for 5 working days or less. These spells however, only account for 20.4% of the total working days lost.<sup>19</sup> In the NICS, 72.9% of absence spells were short term in nature and accounted for 16.6% of total working days.<sup>20</sup>**

**In contrast, absences lasting for more than 20 days accounted for only 11.5% of absence spells but almost 62% of the total days lost.<sup>21</sup> Long term spells accounted for 13.1% of absence spells which amounted to 69.4% of total working days lost within the NICS.<sup>22</sup>**

**Graph 6 and 7 show that the trends found in DRD mirrors that found in the NICS as a whole.**



<sup>17</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in DRD 2007/08*, pg 9.

<sup>18</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 17.

<sup>19</sup> NISRA, pg 10.

<sup>20</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in DRD 2007/08*

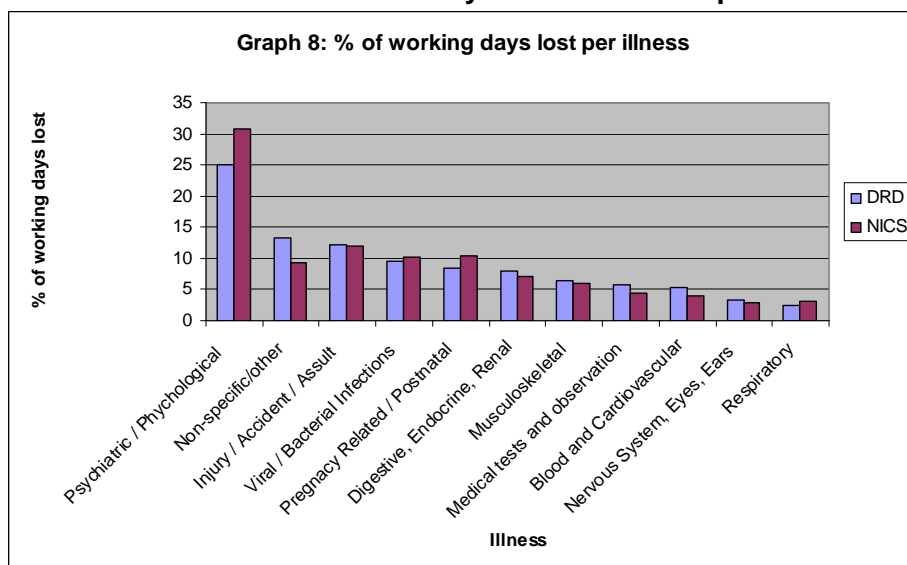
<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 17.



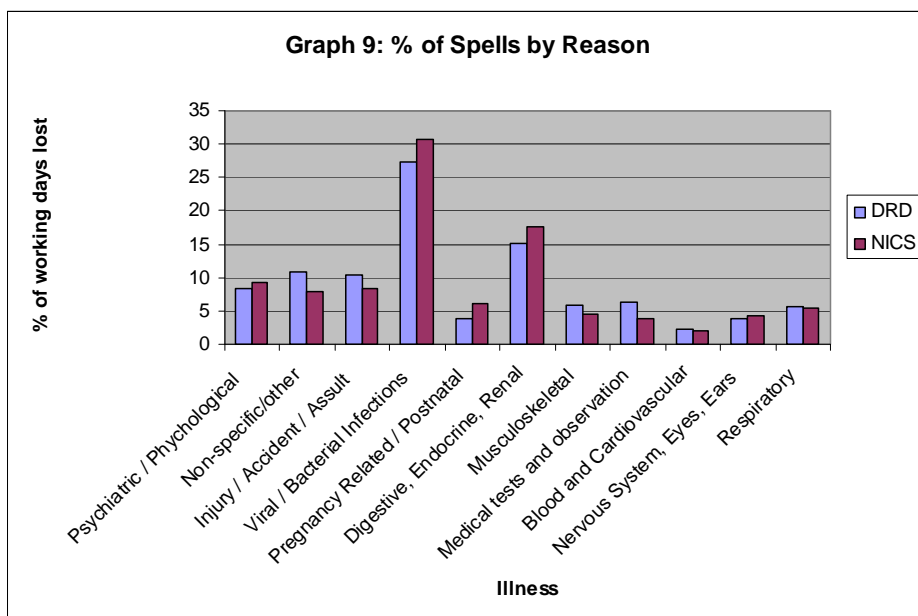
### 1.8 - REASONS FOR SICKNESS

Psychiatric/Psychological illnesses accounted for the largest proportion of working days lost at 25% at DRD.<sup>23</sup> This trend was true for NICS in which the illness accounted for 30.7% of days lost.<sup>24</sup> See Graph 8.



There was also a noticeably higher incidence of non-specific/other illnesses recorded within DRD. (13.3% compared to the NICS 9.2%).

Viral/Bacterial Infections accounted for the largest proportion of absence spells (27.3%) in DRD.<sup>25</sup> This trend was also true for the NICS (30.7%).<sup>26</sup> See Graph 9.



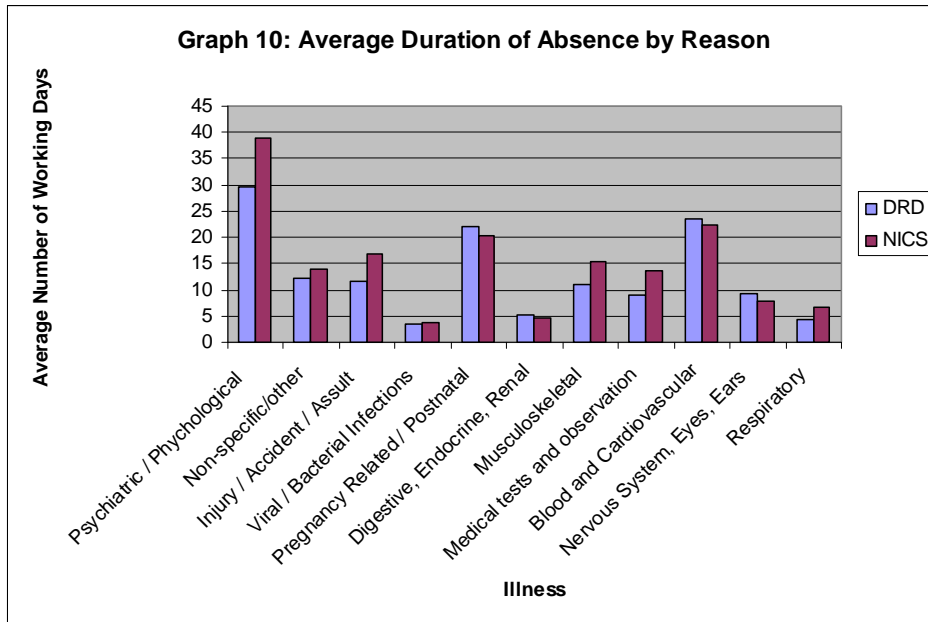
The average duration of illnesses within DRD varied from 3.5 working days for viral/bacterial infections to 29.7 days for psychiatric/psychological illnesses.<sup>27</sup> See Graph 10.

<sup>23</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness in DRD 2007/08*, pg 12.

<sup>24</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness in the NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 21.

<sup>25</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness in DRD 2007/08*, pg 12.

<sup>26</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness in the NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 21.



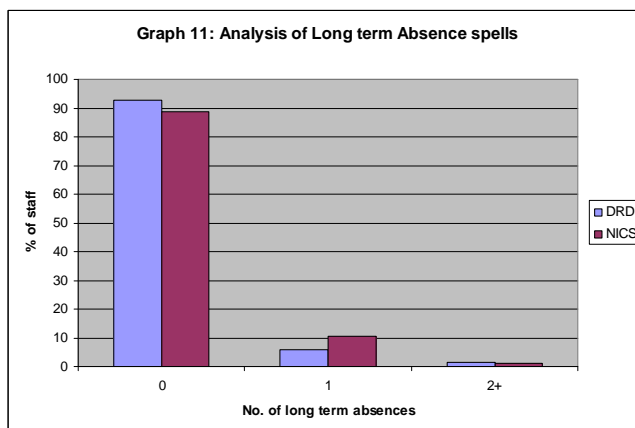
DRD performs favourably in comparison with the NICS average in relation to the days lost for psychiatric /psychological illnesses.

### **1.9 - LONG TERM SICKNESS**

Long term sickness is defined as an absence lasting more than 20 consecutive working days. This is a major policy consideration as it accounts for the vast majority of days off and therefore cost to the Department.

**In DRD in 2007/08, 7.3% of staff recorded one or more periods of long term absence. This accounted for 61.7% of the total working days lost and cost an estimated £1.1m.<sup>28</sup>**

**In the NICS as a whole, 11.4% of staff recorded one or more spells of long term absence. This accounted for 69.4% of the total working days lost and cost an estimated £16.4m.<sup>29</sup>**



Graph 11 opposite shows that **92.7% of staff in DRD recorded 0 periods of long term absence.** This compared favourably to the NICS average of 88.6%.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in DRD 2007/08*, pg 9

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pg 27.

**Psychiatric/Psychological illnesses (34%)<sup>31</sup> accounted for the highest proportion of the working days lost on a long term basis in DRD. This was true also for the civil service as a whole. (39.5%).<sup>32</sup>**

The category of psychiatric/ psychological illnesses covers a broad range of conditions, the most frequent being problems related to life-management difficulties.

The Department for Finance and Personnel has set up a taskforce to research the causes of long term illness including work related stress and to make recommendations to address them.

This is an important area and the NIAO report on *Managing Sickness Levels within the Civil Service* identifies that on average Northern Ireland Civil Service tend to be off for twice as long or more than similar illnesses in GB.<sup>33</sup>

The NIAO report further identified that early intervention by occupational health professions can limit the duration of absence. However, it takes on average 53 days to be seen by an Occupational Therapist.<sup>34</sup>

### **1.10 - TARGETS**

During 2005, Ministerial targets were agreed for an overall reduction in sickness absence within the NICS to 9.5 days by 2010. Targets were set for individual departments taking into consideration the nature of the department.

Tables 1-3 below identify how DRD and other departments performed against primary targets in 2008.

**Table 1 –Overall days lost per Staff Year 2007/08<sup>35</sup> (Ranked in descending order)**

	<i>Actual</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>% Difference</i>
DETI	7.4	8.8	15.8
DCAL	11.4	11.4	0.3
DRD	9	8.8	-1.8
OFMDFM	9.7	9.2	-5.3
DEL	13.7	12.8	-7.3
DOE	11	10	-10.4
DFP	11.5	10.3	-11.4
DHSSPS	10.2	9	-13.8
<b>Overall</b>	<b>12.9</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>-14.8</b>
DSD	16.9	14	-20.4
DARD	10.9	9	-21.1
DE	11.8	8.5	-38.9

**DRD narrowly missed its target on total days lost by 1.8%. The NICS missed this target by 14.8%. Only DCAL and DETI achieved this target**

<sup>31</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in DRD 2007/08*, pg 16.

<sup>32</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 21.

<sup>33</sup> NIAO, 2008, *Management of Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> NIAO, *Managing Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service*, March 22 2008.

<sup>35</sup> NISRA, *Analysis of Sickness Absence in NI Departments 2007/08*, pg 35.

Table 2 – Long term frequency targets 2007/09<sup>36</sup> (Ranked in descending order)

	<i>Actual</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>% Difference</i>
DETI	7.1	8.7	18.9
DEL	13.8	14.3	3.1
DFP	10.5	10.1	-3.6
DRD	9.5	8.8	-7.9
DOE	9.8	9	-8.5
DSD	16.3	15	-9
<b>Overall</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>11.3</b>	<b>-9.9</b>
OFMDFM	9	7.9	-14.4
DARD	11	8.9	-23.9
DCAL	10.6	8.3	-27.2
DHSSPS	10.1	7.8	-29.1
DE	10.4	7	-47.9

**DRD missed its targets by 7.9%. Overall, the NICS missed this by 9.9%. Only DETI and DEL achieved this target.**

Table 3 – Long Term Duration (Days)<sup>37</sup> (Ranked in descending order)

	<i>Actual</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>% Difference</i>
OFMDFM	54.3	56.1	3.3
DHSSPS	57.2	52.2	-9.6
DFP	61.3	53.4	-14.7
DRD	53.6	46.6	-15.2
DETI	50.4	41.8	-20.5
DE	68.8	56.3	-22.1
DCAL	59.4	47.4	-25.1
<b>Overall</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>48.7</b>	<b>-27.1</b>
DSD	64.3	50.3	-28
DARD	62.3	47.2	-32
DEL	60.1	45.2	-33
DOE	62.2	40.8	-52.5

**DRD missed this target by 15.2%. The NICS missed it by 27.1%. Only OFMDFM achieved this target.**

Table 4: Short Term Frequency<sup>38</sup> (Ranked in descending order)

	<i>Actual</i>	<i>Target</i>	<i>% Difference</i>
DETI	0.85	1.33	36.1
DARD	0.71	1.08	34.2
DCAL	1.14	1.7	32.9
DEL	0.89	1.26	29.7
DOE	1.06	1.38	23.4
<b>Overall</b>	<b>0.95</b>	<b>1.21</b>	<b>21</b>
DHSSPS	1.01	1.28	20.9
DE	0.91	1.15	20.8
DSD	1	1.25	19.4
DRD	0.79	0.98	19.1
OFMDFM	1.01	1.24	18.8

**DRD achieved this target as did all of the NICS departments.**

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, pg 36.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, pg 37.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, pg 38.

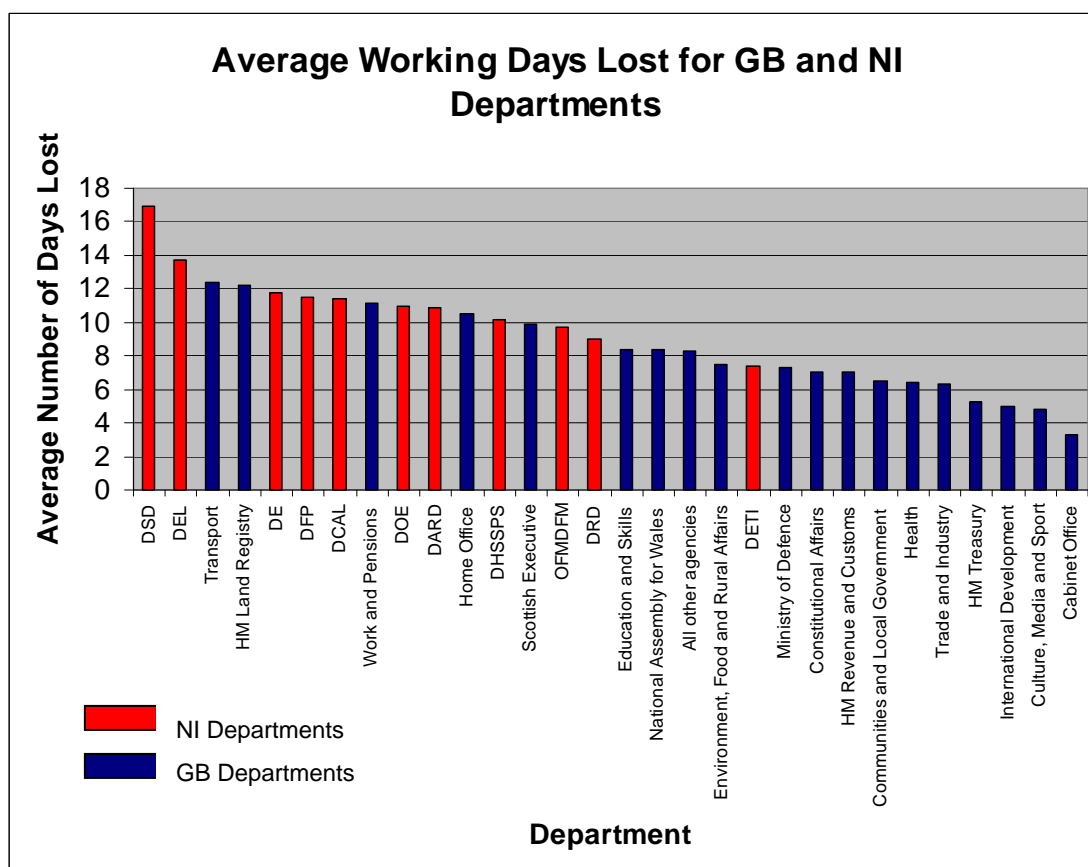
## SECTION 2: ABSENCE LEVELS IN GB

The Northern Ireland Audit Office Report, *Managing Sickness Levels in the Northern Ireland Civil Service*, compares rates of sickness in the NICS to that of GB. The research shows that:

**Sickness levels are 36% higher in the Northern Ireland Civil Service than in Great Britain departments.<sup>39</sup>**

**In 2007/08, the average number of days lost in GB was 9.3 days. This is compared to 12.9 days in NICS and 9.0 days in DRD.<sup>40</sup>**

The table below outlines the average number of days lost for NI Departments (Red) and GB Departments (Blue) in (2006/07).



Note: NI figures relate to 2007/08 whilst GB departments relate to 2006/07. Up to date GB figures have not yet been published.

The table shows that GB civil service departments outperform their Northern Ireland counterparts.

One of the primary reasons for this difference is that civil servants in NI tend to take longer periods of time off. The report notes that:

<sup>39</sup> NIAO, *Managing Sickness in the Northern Ireland Civil Service*, 2008, pg 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

***Northern Ireland Civil Servants are not absent any more frequently than in GB, but they tend to be off work more than twice as long for the same or similar illness. On average, absences last more than twice as long, across the whole range of illnesses, both short and long term.***<sup>41</sup>

For example, NIAO report noted that whilst the average duration for psychiatric/psychological illness is 38 days in NICS, it is 22 days in GB.

Furthermore, whilst it is true for both NICs and GB departments, that women take more absence days than men,

***Levels of sickness in NICS are almost double the female rate in GB.***<sup>42</sup>

Studies of sickness absence in the UK have observed that grade, gender and age are strongly associated with absence. Absence is higher among junior grades and there more women in these roles. Studies have also shown that high female absence rates may also be attributable to role as primary carers.

The NIAO concluded that *we have seen no evidence that the reasons for the very high level of female absence in NICS compared with Great Britain have been investigated.*<sup>43</sup>

Other characteristics relating to nature of illnesses are broadly comparable with the UK.

The NIAO office report notes that lower levels of absence have been achieved through a series of best practice initiatives in GB.<sup>44</sup>

Initiatives have included:<sup>45</sup>

- demonstrating senior management's commitment to service improvement;
- establishing and disseminating clear procedures on the management of attendance and systems for report and reviewing sickness absence;
- actively managing short and long term sickness absence;
- taking steps to minimise sickness absence;
- training staff and managers; and
- evaluating policies and procedures.

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<sup>41</sup> NIAO, 2008, *Management of Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, pg 20.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, pg 23.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, pg 8.

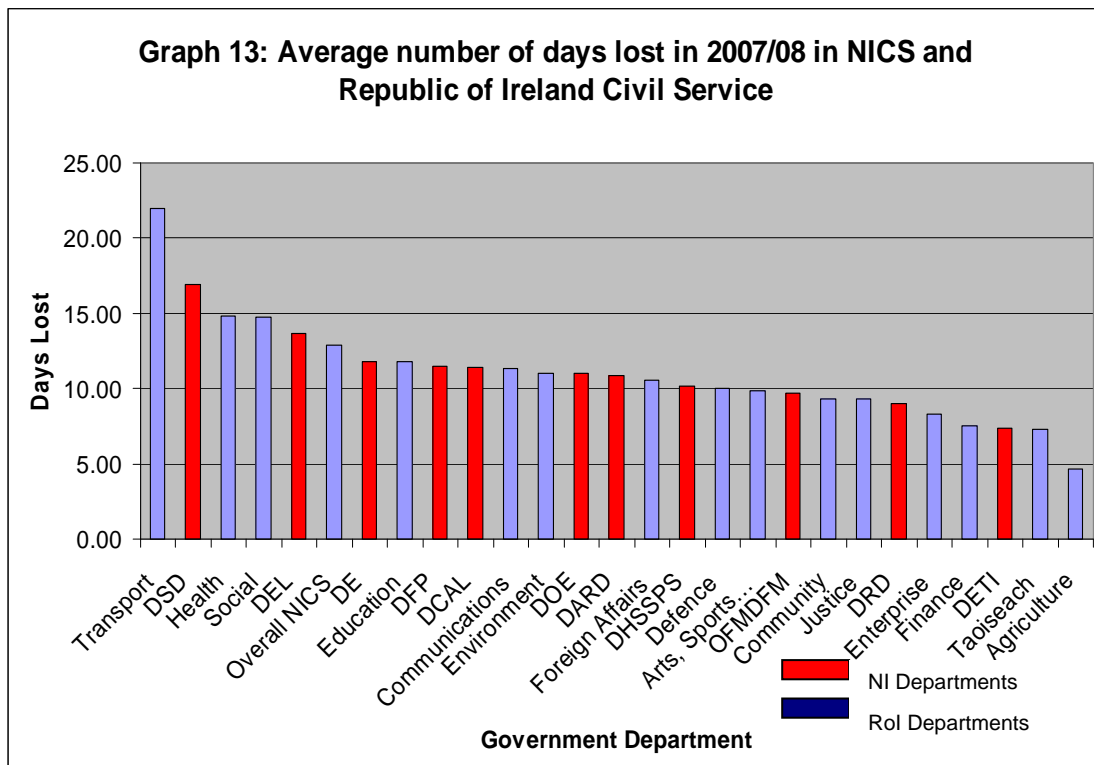
<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, Appendix 2.

### SECTION 3: ABSENCE LEVELS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

High levels of absence in the Republic of Ireland civil service is also reported and an Investigation into this is underway by the Comptroller and Auditor General.<sup>46</sup>

A final report is expected late 2009 and further analysis will be available at this time.<sup>47</sup>

Graph 13 below shows the average number of working days lost in 2007/08 for each department in the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland governments.<sup>48</sup>



**The graph shows that levels of absence within the Republic of Ireland are broadly comparable to that found in the NICS.**

The highest absence levels are found within the Department of Transport in the Republic of Ireland which recorded an average of 22 days off per year. The lowest absence levels were found in the Department for Agriculture which recorded an average of 4.64 days lost.

<sup>46</sup> The Irish Independent, *High levels of sickness to be probed*, Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2008.

<sup>47</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General, Correspondence with Researcher, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Research and Library, House of the Oireachtas, Correspondence with Researcher, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2009.