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Do you ask the work question?

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Do you ask the work question?



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Introduction

Work is good for us; for both our physical and mental health and well-being¹. It is also good for society and recent Government drivers²⁻⁵ place increasing emphasis on employers, managers and the NHS to actively address work-related factors and 'work flow' (see figure 1).

These issues are not only the remit of specialist services, such as Jobcentre Plus, Pathways to Work providers (e.g. condition management programmes) and the proposed 'Fit for Work' services, but there is now also an onus on **all** health professionals:

"... to do all we can to help people enter, stay in or return to work." (Healthcare Professionals' Consensus Statement³)

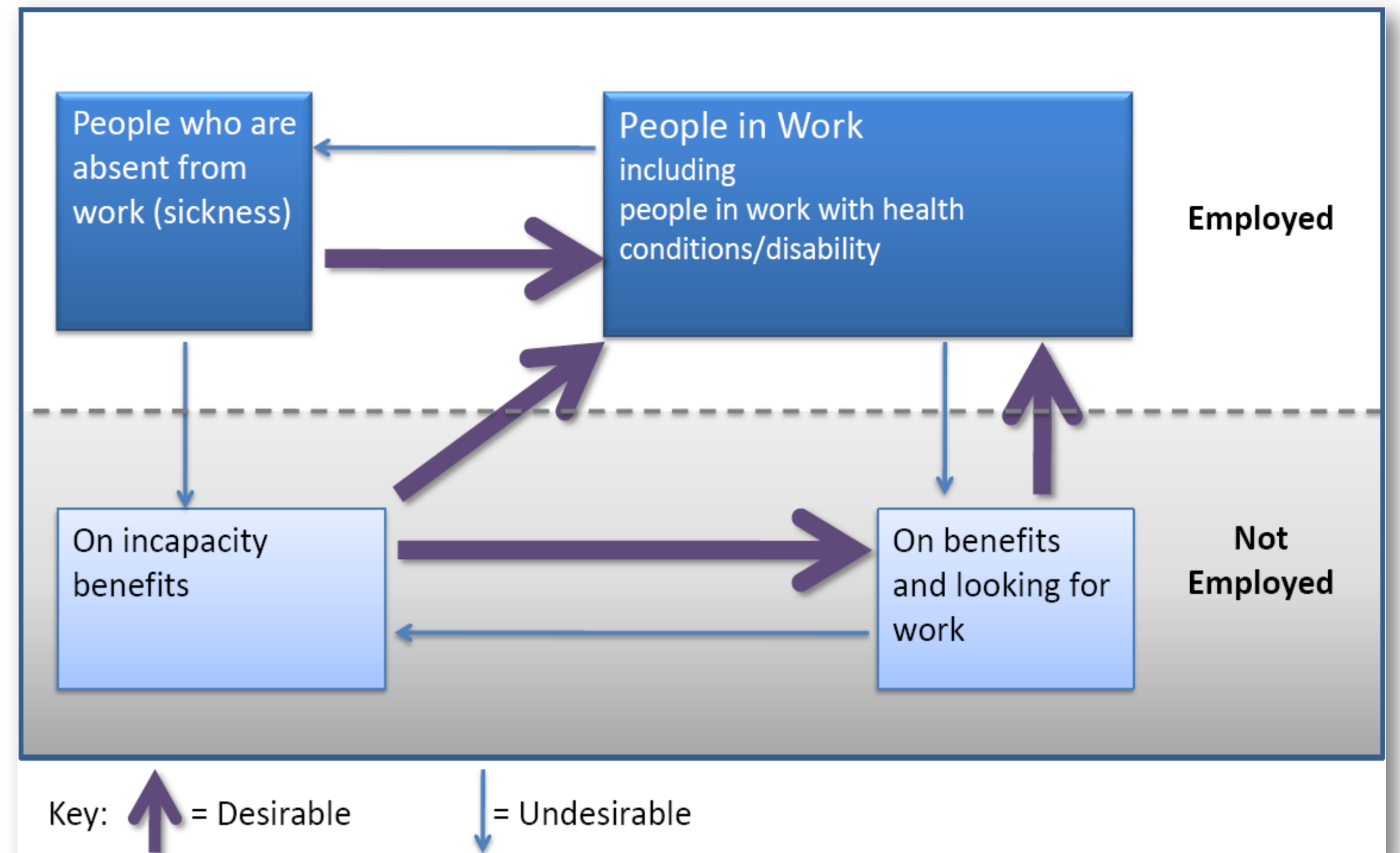
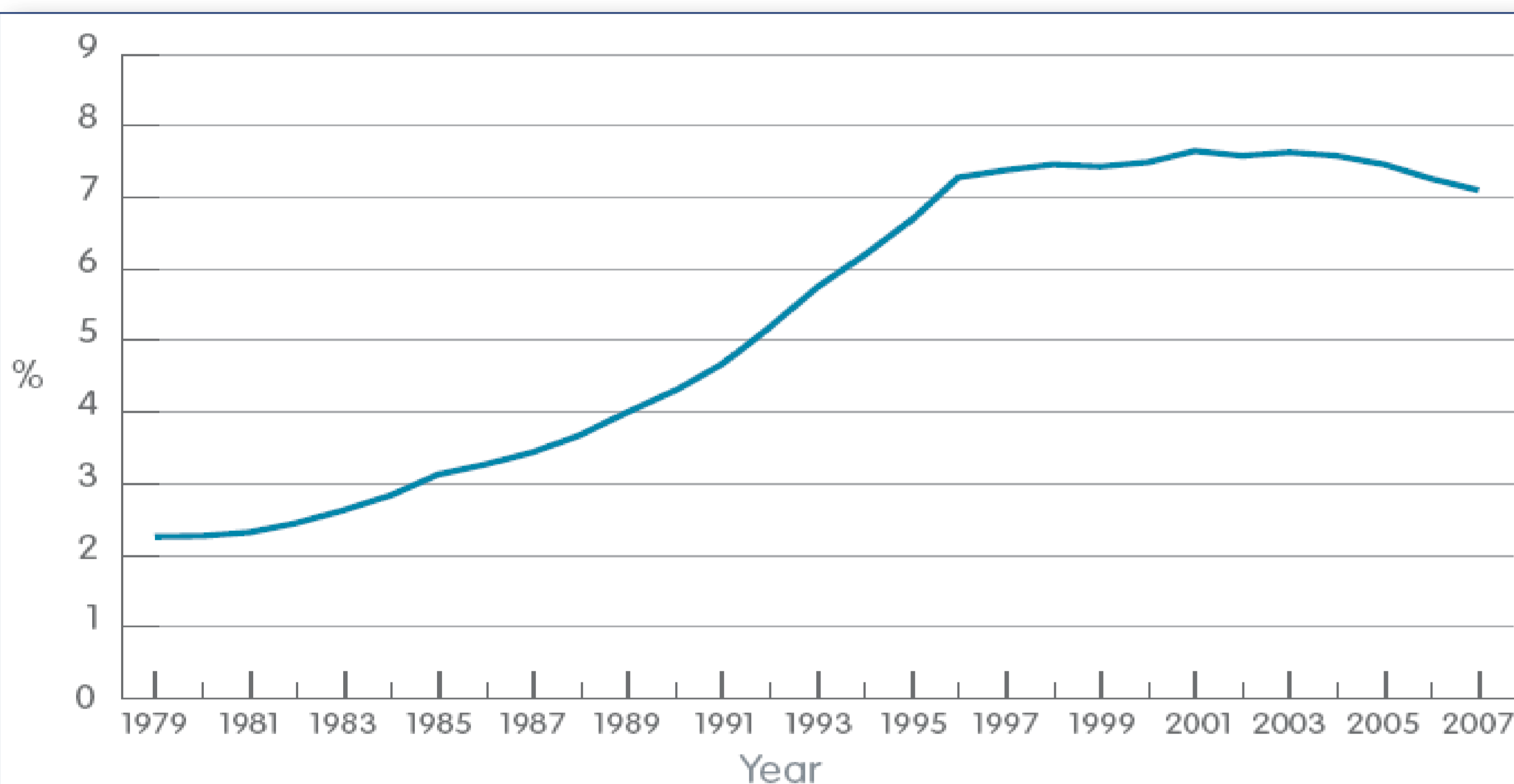


Figure 1: Flow of people in and out of work (adapted from DWP, 2008⁴)



Note: Discontinuity prior to 1995 due to exclusion of incapacity benefits short term lower rate.
Source: DWP Administrative Data

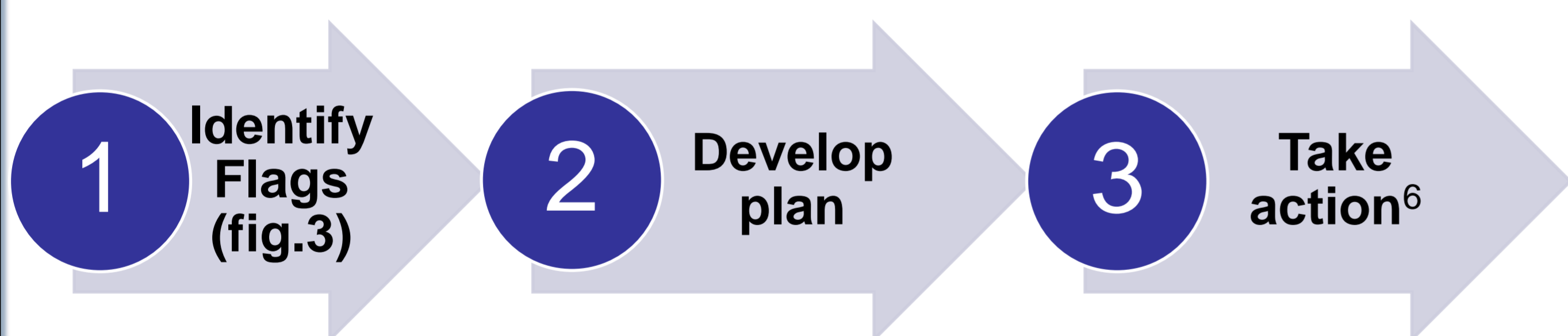
Figure 2: Proportion of working age population on incapacity benefits (© Crown Copyright 2008³)

Current problems

Sickness absence/worklessness costs:

- The economy:
 - £100 billion annually (≈ NHS annual budget)
 - plus 175 million working days lost³
- The NHS:
 - £5-11 billion
 - 10.3 million working days
 - which costs a further £1.7 billion⁵
- Number of new incapacity benefit (now replaced by Employment and Support Allowance) claimants reducing, but existing claimants staying on benefits longer (see figure 2)³.

Top Tips



Ask about:

- Their understanding of the cause of their problem
- What they are expecting will help
- The physical and stressful demands of their job
- Their expectation of returning to work
- Job satisfaction
- Social support – both at home and in the workplace
- Potential for modification of work
- Communication from/with employer regarding their problem/absence

Management principles:

- Promote a stay at work culture
- Encourage early return to work if off
 - Develop specific plan of 'when and how'
- Liaise with employer/Jobcentre advisor/case manager
 - Use written confidentiality waiver
- Consider assessing and rehabilitating in the workplace
- Use of 'fit note' rather than sick note
 - Emphasising ability *not* disability

Yellow Flags (person)

- Psychosocial factors associated with poor outcomes and also chronic pain (e.g. thoughts, feelings, behaviours)

Blue Flags (workplace)

- Impact of health on perceived features of work, associated with prolonged absence (e.g. job satisfaction)

Black Flags (context)

- Organisational obstacles, such as systems and policies (e.g. HR, benefits)

Figure 3: 'Flags': barriers/obstacles to recovery and return to work

References

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5. Boorman, S. (2009) *NHS health and well-being – Final report.* London: Department of Health. <http://www.nhshealthandwellbeing.org/>
6. Kendall, N.A.S. Burton, A.K. Main, C.J. & Watson, P.J. on behalf of the Flags Think-Tank (2009) *Tackling musculoskeletal problems: a guide for the clinic and workplace – identifying obstacles using the psychosocial flags framework.* London: TSO.