Handout 1: What Is Policy?

What is policy?
When a sample of workers in the community services area was asked what is policy, they gave the following replies:

- Rules or guidelines
- Our organisation’s structure that we work by
- Procedures for workers to follow
- Guides established to determine how we do our work
- Standards for our organisation
- Our agencies guide to best practice.

As you can see there are many answers to this question. These different responses to what is policy show that the word policy is used in many different ways.

Elements of policy include:

- Policy creates a framework for action within the Carmen Poldis Community Centre
- Policy is a decision
- Policy is grounded in legitimate authority
- Policy is a written product
- Policy creation is an ongoing process
- Legitimate authority within the Carmen Poldis Community Centre makes policy.

Examples of policy include:

- Who is eligible to use the services of the Carmen Poldis Community Centre?
- How to lock up the premises
- What to do if a client becomes violent
- What to do if you discover child abuse.

The definition of policy that will be used here is: A statement, which either expresses broad or specific management decisions, based on a philosophy and ideology of the organisation (Hint: if you would like to understand this definition a bit more try listening to the conversation in the tearoom).

What is the Purpose of Policy?

Policy is about achieving objectives. It is a means to an end. Through consultation and interaction governments, organisations and groups determine courses of action that will gain them certain results.

For example residents living with excessive aircraft noise complained to their local council about the constant roaring of planes overhead. Local councils appealed to the Australian government and a policy was drawn up stating that large aircraft could not take off or land between 11.00pm and 6.00am.
In the example above it shows how policy is a mechanism to implement laws. An example of the way policy is implemented to become law in the Community services sector, can be seen in the state laws relating to mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect.

Policy also ensures a standard response to commonplace issues that arise in the workplace. For example an orientation policy ensures that all new workers receive the same process and forms to complete.

The final purpose of policy is to be an accountability mechanism for staff and management. For example a policy on Equal Employment Opportunity makes the organisation adhere to issues relating to equal right of workers to promotional opportunities, study leave and flexible work arrangements to name a few.

What is Social Policy?

Workers in community services agencies such as the Carmen Poldis Community Centre are often involved in social policy.

- Social Policy can be defined as a way of regulating social relationships
- It implies welfare, social security, and redistribution of resources
- It incorporates equity, fairness, and social justice
- Economic and social policies are closely connected. For example every economic decision has social costs and affects i.e. health, housing, transport, education
- Traditionally social policy has been concerned with social welfare including the poor, the disadvantages and the dependent.

Criteria for good policy

Will it be useful for the users?  
I.e. will it be useful for all the staff, users of the service management committee at Carmen Poldis and outside agencies?

Does it take other policies into account?  
i.e. Does it take into account Carmen Poldis policies on Duty of Care, Access and Equity, Occupational Health and Safety and other related policies?

Will it improve the quality of the service?  
I.e. Will it improve the usage of the conference room, improve the booking system and bring in some revenue for Carmen Poldis.
Steps in evaluating if the policy is good policy

Evaluation is a tool for collecting and managing information about policies and procedures.

1. Are the policy objectives clear and precise
2. Do the objectives achieve the stated outcome? Why or Why not?
3. Is the policy relevant in the light of current circumstances? Why? Why not?
4. Research whether there are better ways of achieving these objectives.