

# AASW Policy & Advocacy

## How to develop a policy submission



**AASW**

Australian Association  
of Social Workers

Written by  
Dr Sebastian Cordoba  
Australian Association of Social Workers  
2020

## Introduction

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The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) 'Code of Ethics' underlines the important role of the AASW in promoting a just and fair society by advocating for social justice and effective social policy. Policy submissions are an important part of any social advocacy movement as they provide an avenue for communicating directly with key decision makers.

The AASW has a long history in developing policy submissions at all levels of government, advocating for the rights of individuals, groups and communities, and the profession itself. Given its significance, the aim of this document is to provide social workers with a guide on how to engage in policy practice focusing on the development of formal policy submissions.

### Why policy?

Advocacy is a core skill of the social work profession and has been since the profession's very beginning. Advocating for the rights and needs of individuals, groups and communities can be achieved through numerous methods. 'Social work policy practice' is a powerful and effective approach as it has the potential to make a difference in the lives of thousands of Australians.

Policy practice is 'using social work skills to propose and change policies in order to achieve the goal of social and economic justice'.<sup>1</sup> Policy practice is achieved through the development of policy positions (at the AASW this can be in the form of Position Statements at a national level), media releases approved by the President or CEO and

through the development of policy submissions.

At all levels of government social policy is never static. It is constantly changing, evolving and being reviewed.

Governments continually conduct consultation processes seeking submissions on a large number of social issues. These processes can greatly influence the decision-making of legislators, with broad-reaching consequences.

Social workers have an ethical and professional responsibility to make sure that social policy does not discriminate or disadvantage members of society. Therefore, policy practice and policy submissions are seen as integral parts of social work practice.

If you are interested in making policy submissions the first step is to identify a relevant consultation process, and also that the topic is in line with AASW advocacy priorities.

### Where to make submissions

Policy submissions are best made through formal consultation processes but they can also be unsolicited.

Processes vary at state or territory and federal levels so we recommend closely monitoring the following websites to identify current government consultations.

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<sup>1</sup> Cummins, L. K., Byers, K. V. & Pedrick, L. E. (2011). *Policy practice for social workers: New strategies for a new era* (1st ed). Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA.

## How to develop a submission

Policy submissions must be concise. In the experience of the National Office policy & advocacy team their argumentative strength lies in their ability to communicate ideas clearly.

In developing a submission there are eight key stages:

### 1. Identify the appropriate consultation

Search government websites for a suitable consultation process. Make sure you read the 'terms of reference' closely to determine the scope of the inquiry. Also make sure you confirm the time frames and whether it is an area in which you are able to make a contribution.

### 2. Policy analysis

Once you have identified a policy consultation process you would like to make a submission to, study the policy context and history to gain a better understanding of the topic.

This could include reading previous submissions from key stakeholder groups or documents from the AASW or related groups. This is an important step as it will help to clarify what your main argument will be.

### 3. The consultation process

Once you have identified a general argument it is important to consult with social workers who have direct experience with this issue. This is a pivotal step as it allows the argument to move beyond a purely theoretical exercise and provide specific detail and information. Policymakers are interested in hearing from social

workers with on-the-ground experience so it can be advantageous to make sure this voice is present in your submission.

It is through consultations that you will begin to further clarify your main argument and make sure that it reflects what workers experience in the field.

### 4. Developing an argument

Identify the main argument of your submission with three to five sub-points. All submissions must be driven by a central argument regarding the social policy issues that will be the key takeaway message for the reader.

This argument can have several different elements to it but it must be driven by a main idea that is easily communicated: '*what do you want to be different?*'

### 5. Write the submission

When writing a submission it is important that you are direct and succinct with your argument from the start. The reader must understand what your main points are by the end of the first page.

Healy & Mulholland<sup>2</sup> propose four key features of an effective proposal:

#### Engaging

- The proposal is accessible, use headings and a clear structure
- The proposal must be well written and well structured to maintain the interest of the reader, remember you are one of hundreds of submissions that the government will look at.
- Be passionate, but demonstrate that passion through your

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<sup>2</sup> Healy, K & Mulholland, J 2012, *Writing Skills for Social Workers*, 2nd edn, Sage, London,

research and clarity of expression

### **Credible**

- Clearly articulate what gives you the authority to speak on the issue
- Use evidence, and consider a wide range of sources, not just journal articles.

### **Focused**

- Be as clear as possible, what are you asking the government to do?
- Present the most amount of information with clarity and brevity
- You are trying to convince someone who doesn't agree, consider this in all your arguments

### **Feasible**

- Government is always working under constraints
- The feasibility of your proposal is tested in the recommendations you put to government.
- It is up to you to demonstrate how your proposed solution addresses the problem and how they may be practically implemented

At the end of this guide is a 'policy submission template' that provides further information regarding the AASW's recommended structure.

## **6. Submission structure**

Every consultation process is different but the majority have a list of 'terms of reference' covering the specific points the government is looking at in their inquiry. In your submission you can

attempt to answer each 'term' as a question or identify broad themes across the terms. There is no right or wrong way to this, but dot points for each 'term' can be a very effective way of communicating a lot of information in an accessible manner.

For more detail see our policy submission template.

## **7. Writing style and tone**

In order to communicate your argument, it is essential that your writing is cohesive and professional in tone. While social policy is an emotive area, it is important to be able to express your position in a way that engages the reader in a respectful manner. Achieving this will greatly assist you in developing a convincing argument and create mutual respect.

A submission is not an academic essay, so while it is essential that it has a professional tone it can be based on direct practice experience. The point of view of direct practitioners is an important and potentially powerful voice that can sometimes be absent from social policy.

## **8. Finalising the document**

As with any piece of formal writing make sure you proofread it and have someone else read it to make sure your arguments are clear.

Make sure you read and are aware of the submission timelines.

For more information and examples of policy submissions visit the [AASW's policy webpage](#).

## What's next?

Policy submissions can have immediate and long-term impacts. One of their main aims is to contribute to public debate and communicate to key decision-makers important arguments around an issue. If your submission is well received you may be called to give evidence in a public hearing. This is a chance to speak directly with government officials in a public forum who will ask for further information about the position you have written about in your submission. Your submission may be cited in reports (including parliamentary reports) when arguing for or against certain legislation or other policy changes.

On our website you can access examples of the AASW being called to give evidence (including transcripts) and the inclusion of our submissions in parliamentary reports.

Policy change is not immediate and many times submissions may not receive any further action. It is important to understand that without a constant contribution to this process, key voices and messages may not be heard. Policy practice is a continuous process and an important one in influencing policy and creating social change.

## Conclusion

The AASW strongly encourages social workers to make policy submissions. It is an integral part of social work practice and one of the most effective ways of engaging with key decision-makers to positively impact the quality of life of all Australians.

# Policy Submission Template

## Introduction

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- *A brief statement identifying which inquiry you are making a submission to, who you are and your main arguments in a clear statement*

## Information about the author

- *A summary of who you are, including your background, experience and how you are positioned to make an informed contribution to this issue,*

## Submission summary

- *Use dot points to clearly list your main argument*
- *Make sure that the reader is able to fully understand your argument from this section alone. They should also be intrigued enough to continue reading*
- *Include only about four points.*

## Response

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- *This section is where you detail your argument and response.*
- *There is no correct way to this as long as it is succinct and accessible.*
- *Referencing social work research, papers and programs is advisable to ensure your arguments are seen as considered and provide breadth of support for the submission.*
- *Many submissions treat the ‘terms of reference’ as questions and you can answer them in dot points. This guarantees that the reader can access your points in an engaging manner.*
- *The language and tone you use can be an important aspect of constructing a convincing argument so it is necessary to understand who your audience is.*
- *We recommend no more than three to four pages.*

## Conclusion

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- *A final, brief concluding statement that leaves the reader with a clear idea of what your submission is about.*

## References

- *You must reference all articles and sources cited in your submission*



[www.aasw.asn.au](http://www.aasw.asn.au)

