

# What is the difference between a Policy, a Process and a Procedure?

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There are a number of definitions for each but basically a process is what you do and a procedure is how you do it. In relation to process visualizations, the sequential activity blocks are the process and the information behind each activity block is, in varying degrees of detail/complexity, the procedure. A process visualization contains both a process illustration/map/flowchart and a set of related procedures. There could be any number of procedures associated with a single process.

Many organisations have mixed policy, process and procedure in a single document which complicates understanding and the implementation of both the policy, the process and the procedure. This is particularly true in the nhs.

## Complaints and other customer service policies and procedures

### Complaints Policy

The policy describes how NHS England manages, responds to and learns from complaints made about its services and the way in which they are commissioned. This is an interim policy to allow time for further consultation and to incorporate any recommendations from wider reviews.

- [Complaints policy](#)

### Complaints procedures

This page outlines the NHS England complaints procedure which is designed to be as patient focused as possible and to allow investigations of complaints to be carried out effectively and efficiently.

- [Complaints procedures](#)

Source: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/contact-us/pub-scheme/pol-proc/>

A **policy** is a guiding principle used to set direction in an organization. A **process** is a series of activities that convert inputs to outputs using resources. A **procedure** is a series of steps to be followed as a consistent and repetitive approach to accomplish an end result or task. Organizations should document their policies, processes and procedures but this should be done in separate documents.

The NHS England 'Complaints and other customer service policies and procedures' is outlined above and the actual documents can be found by following the links. The policy document talks about policy, process and procedure. Do you think that they comply with the definitions of these documents discussed in this paper and do you think that matters?

In my view it is very important that these three documents are kept separate and that they comply with the universally recognised definitions of each. If these documents create confusion or ill defined policy, process and procedure then that will result in additional work right throughout the organisation.

The attached diagram, Figure 1, Policy - Process - Procedure Model, illustrates the hierarchical system of process management. At the top level we have the organization's Policies. These policies should be reflected throughout the organisation but particularly in its processes and procedures. At the next level Goals are set for improvements in the organisation's performance.

Each Functional Area will have a number of Processes through which it uses its resources to turn its inputs into its required outputs. Front line staff, part of the resources, who work in these processes will be required to follow written procedures to ensure that they are undertaking their work as required. Within those procedures some tasks may require further detailed written instructions. These detailed instructions are often called Work Instructions.

It is the detailed tasks that staff will have been taught during their period in education and training. Many text books are available describing most of these tasks, particularly the clinical tasks. Actual techniques involved in the task are continually being improved and new technology is introduced.

If the processes were better understood and documented and there was less variation then maybe they could also be included in the training syllabus!

## Further definitions

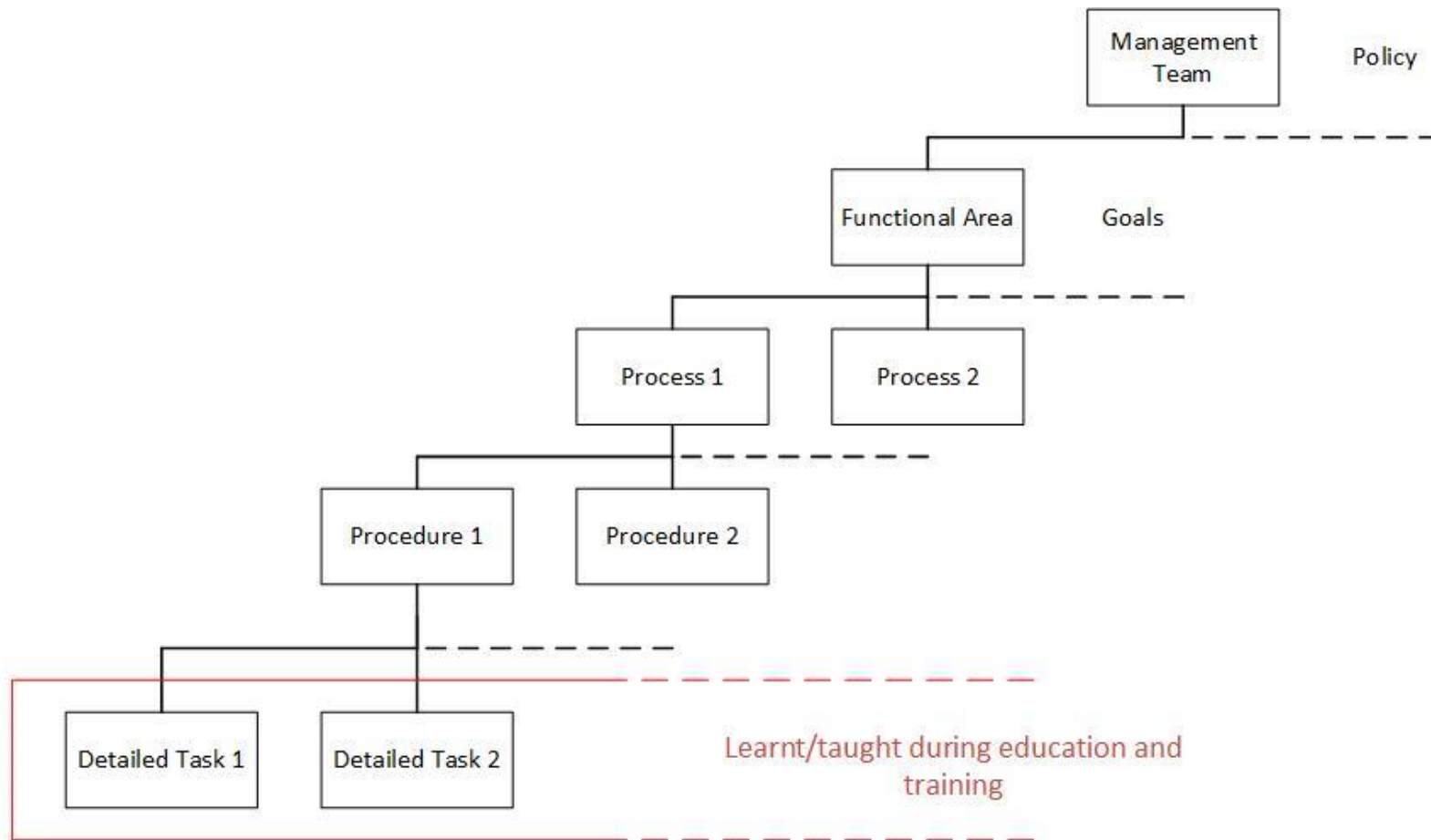
A **Policy** is a deliberate system of principles to guide decisions and achieve rational outcomes. A policy is a statement of intent. A plan of action adopted or pursued by an individual, government, party, business, etc.

A **Process** is a set of activities that interact to achieve a result. A series of actions which produce a change or development.

A **Procedure** is a set of instructions or recipes, a set of commands that show how to achieve some result, such as to prepare or make something. A way of acting or progressing, an established method.

A **Work Instruction** is a document that provides specific instructions to carry out an Activity. A step by step guide to perform a single instruction. A Work Instruction contains more detail than a Procedure and is only created if detailed step-by-step instructions are needed.

All the above documents should be produced in writing, as stand alone documents, and made available to relevant staff. Documents should be reviewed on a regular basis and subject to continuous improvement.



*Figure 1, The Policy - Process - Procedure Hierarchical Model*

Source: Rose, T.J. (2003) Sustained Growth in Small Enterprises – A Process Management Approach, PhD Thesis, School of Industrial and Manufacturing Science, Cranfield University, UK, 2003