

**Submission  
No 23**

## **INQUIRY INTO APARTMENT DESIGN STANDARDS**

**Organisation:** Victorian Building Authority

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Inquiry into Apartment Design Standards  
Legislative Assembly, Environment and Planning Committee  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

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Dear Committee Secretariat

## **VICTORIAN BUILDING AUTHORITY SUBMISSION – INQUIRY INTO APARTMENT DESIGN STANDARDS**

The Victorian Building Authority (VBA) welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Apartment Design Standards. As the principal regulator for the building and plumbing industries in Victoria, the VBA regulates for a safe quality-built environment. The VBA contributes to public health, safety and amenity by overseeing compliance with regulations, legal requirements and professional standards for practitioners and by encouraging continuous improvement within the industry.

Ensuring Victoria has well-built apartment buildings for residents now and into the future is critical. Apartments must be designed with accessibility and safety in mind and essential safety measures (ESMs) provided must be fit for purpose and protect residents in the unlikely event of an emergency.

### **Adopting Accessible Housing Standards**

The VBA strongly welcomes the adoption of mandatory accessibility standards in the National Construction Code (NCC). The new mandatory standards, which will take effect in 2022, are expected to increase the availability of homes with accessibility features to 50 per cent of Australia's total housing stock by 2050. These reforms were enacted thanks to Victoria's advocacy at the National Building Ministers meeting earlier this year.

The Liveable Housing Design Guidelines silver standards will ensure basic accessibility features are included in all newly constructed homes and apartments. This reform is long overdue and will mean new homes will be required to include features as step free entry, ground level accessible toilets, and transitional spaces to allow ease of movement. It is important that housing designs include critical safety elements and are consistent with standards in the NCC and reflect current construction best practice.

### **Essential Safety Measures (ESMs)**

ESMs are defined in the *Building Regulations 2018* and are safety features such as exit doors, emergency lifts, fire detection and alarm systems, smoke alarms and sprinkler systems which if well maintained, can provide residents with more time to exit a building and lessen the chance of fire spreading. They require ongoing care and maintenance

and must be appropriately maintained by suitably qualified practitioners. The *Building Act 1993* (Act) gives councils the responsibility for enforcing the compliance of ESMs. Building owners are required to prepare an annual ESM report that provides evidence of maintenance checks, safety measures and repair work. These reports must be made available to the fire brigade's Chief Officer or the Municipal Building Surveyor on request.

The VBA takes an active role in educating and informing consumers, practitioners, building owners and managers on the importance of ESMs and their role in saving lives. The VBA has produced a number of ESM instructional podcasts ([In Safe Hands](#)) aimed at building owners and managers covering ESMs from legislation to enforcement to ensure ESMs are maintained in buildings across the State. Information on ESMs is also available on the VBA's [website](#).

### **Research into safer building or plumbing work**

The VBA is required under the Act to conduct or promote research relating to the regulation of the building and plumbing industries in Victoria. The VBA has an active [research program](#) and does so in partnerships with leading reputable research institutions and consortiums to help improve the building system. Two research projects of relevance to the inquiry include:

#### *Routine servicing of wet fire protection equipment*

Wet fire protection equipment such as sprinklers, pumpsets, hose reels and hydrants need to be well maintained over the lifetime of the building. Routine servicing of this equipment must be carried out by appropriately qualified licensed or registered plumbing practitioners. The research estimated that approximately 1.8 million hours per year are required to service equipment in line with regulatory requirements.

As highlighted above, routine servicing and maintenance of ESMs including wet fire protection equipment – by qualified and licensed practitioners – is critical to protect the safety of apartment building residents.

#### *Indoor mould and moisture damage in Victorian residential buildings*

A key barrier that impacts the liveability of apartments is the presence of indoor mould and moisture damage. Mould in buildings is an indicator of the presence of underlying moisture problems, which can occur because of water ingress through defective cladding, a plumbing failure or due to a lack of management of water vapour. Condensation in buildings is linked to negative impacts on human health and amenity, as well as building structural integrity and routinely tops the list of defects encountered in buildings, complaints to the VBA, claims to the Victorian Managed Insurance Authority and disputes to Domestic Building Dispute Resolution Victoria.

While this research is ongoing, early indicators show patterns and clusters of problematic building work that could result in indoor mould – including the design of balconies, water-proofing, and exposure of construction materials to weather conditions during construction. Further analysis of these patterns and clusters will provide insight into practitioner (and tradesperson) competency or skills gaps, and inform future research activity on indoor mould.

If you require further information on the VBA submission, please contact Shobini Mahendra, Chief Analyst, Research & Review via email on [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

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**Sue Eddy**  
Chief Executive Officer