



Apartment Living & COVID-19 Best Practice Guideline

18 January 2022

OWNERS CORPORATIONS

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Apartment Living and COVID-19 for Owners Corporations

Introduction

As Victoria has surpassed the 90 per cent double vaccination rate among the eligible population over 12 years of age, most public health restrictions have been lifted, in accordance with the Victorian Government's [Roadmap to Reopening](#), and alignment with the [National Reopening Plan](#) set out by the Commonwealth Government.

This guide is designed to assist owners corporations with managing the ongoing risks of COVID-19 as Victoria returns to life as normal and learn to live with and manage the virus.

With up to 25 per cent of the Victorian population already living in strata communities, including apartments, townhouses, and other types of strata complexes, if you live in strata, it is highly likely that someone living in your complex has tested positive for COVID-19.

As a result, this information is extremely relevant, and it remains a key to ensuring that we are able to afford each other consideration and respect during this next phase of what has been an unprecedented change to the way we live in strata.

We have compiled a thorough list of online resources to aid you, but for the most important single resource for further information about staying safe during COVID-19, please visit: <https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/staying-safe>.

About COVID-19 (Coronavirus - SARS-CoV-2/2019-nCoV)

COVID-19 is a respiratory disease spread between people.

Apartment buildings and other shared living spaces pose the potential risk of an infected resident spreading the virus to other residents. This is also known as community spread.

Common symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Fever
- Coughing
- Fatigue/tiredness
- Shortness of breath
- Loss of sense of taste and/or smell

If you suspect that you may have COVID-19, please call the **Victorian Government's 24-Hour Coronavirus hotline on 1800 675 398** or visit www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au; you must get tested and self-isolate if you receive a positive diagnosis, are presenting symptoms, and/or have visited known exposure sites.

In an emergency situation, please call 000.

COVIDSafe Measures for Owners Corporations

COVIDSafe Plans

Owners corporations in Victoria must have a COVIDSafe Plan for all common property areas managed.

- Should an owners corporation committee opt to create their own COVIDSafe Plan, a free template can be sourced from the Victorian Government's Coronavirus website at: <https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/covidsafe-plan>.
- The Victorian Government also offers a free, confidential review service for COVIDSafe Plans by professional services firm, Ernst and Young (EY) – to book a review, send an email to covidsafeplanreview@djpr.vic.gov.au.
- Alternatively, a COVIDSafe Plan can be purchased by an owners corporation from a specialist service provider.

Shared facilities/non-essential common property

Indoor and outdoor shared facilities/non-essential common property areas where people are likely to gather for extended periods of time, such as swimming pools, gymnasiums, cinemas, dining, and barbecue areas are open to all residents.

- Evidence of vaccination is **not required** to access shared facilities/non-essential common property in apartment buildings or other strata properties; however, vaccination is highly recommended for all eligible Victorians.
- Check ins via QR codes are required at entrances to any shared facilities/non-essential common property areas such as gyms, pools, and cinemas.
- Check ins are **not required** for other common property areas governed by owners corporations.
- QR code check ins via the Service Victoria App are **not required** for accommodation, except where a person is not staying overnight and is attending a shared facility.
- COVID Marshals/COVID Check-In Marshals are only required for any shared facilities that are staffed on a dedicated basis, and for the duration that any staff member is on duty.
- COVID Marshals/COVID Check-In Marshals are **not required** for shared facilities that are not staffed on a dedicated basis.
- Face masks are **required** to be worn within any indoor common property areas or shared facilities in apartment buildings at present unless an individual exemption applies.
- Individuals and organisations (including owners corporations) may consider additional measures suitable to their unique circumstances.

Contractors and other working visitors attending the property

From 26 November 2021, all workers who have previously attended work on site during heightened restrictions as per designation on the Authorised Worker List and who continue to attend on-site work in the same capacity are required to provide evidence to their employers that they have:

- Received their second dose of an approved COVID-19 vaccination, or
- Have a medical exemption evidenced by an authorised medical practitioner.

Under the Chief Health Officer's (CHO) Directions concerning vaccination requirements for workers, an 'employer' in relation to a worker is defined as:

- The person or entity who directly employs or engages the worker; or
- If the worker is self-employed – the worker.

Strata meetings

Owners corporation committee meetings or Annual General Meetings (AGMs) may be held in person and/or virtually.

Committee members are volunteers and are considered employees of the Owners Corporation under the Occupational Health & Safety Act 2004. As such, the committee should consider the appropriate method for conducting meetings, and if conducted in person, must ensure that all recommended infection risk controls have been adopted.

When deciding of the format for any meeting, the owners corporation must have regard for the manager's safety, and that the format selected ensures infection risk controls have been adopted. If the safety of the manager can't be guaranteed, then the meeting should be held virtually.

- Consideration should be made for how members can access and be included in meetings - for example, some members may attend in person, while others attend via a virtual meeting platform, or a telephone call.
- Some matters do not need an AGM and can be resolved by ballot. You can conduct a ballot via:
 - Post;
 - Telephone;
 - Internet, or
 - Fax.

Electronic voting

Should all, or some of the members of an owners corporation committee or annual general meeting elect to attend via a virtual meeting platform or other electronic means, consideration may also be given to the use of electronic voting.

- Electronic voting is enabled under the Electronic Transactions (Victoria) Act 2000, provided prior consent has been given by each lot owner, which provides for electronic alternatives to the need for a signature and are available for voting by ballot because the approved ballot forms must be signed by lot owners,
- For more information on electronic voting during strata meetings, please visit:
<https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/housing/owners-corporations/meetings-and-committees/voting-and-ballot-guidelines>.

Identifying and Managing COVID-19 in Strata

Responding to a confirmed COVID-19 case

The Victorian Department of Health can help to advise and assist an owners corporation and/or strata manager of a multi-unit dwelling if it has issued a notice to a person to quarantine due to a COVID-19 diagnosis, however, this no longer extends to contact tracing.

In Victoria, it is the prerogative of an owners corporation to arrange for appropriate cleaning services to be undertaken on common property in the event of a confirmed COVID-19 case affecting the use of a building.

We recommend calling the Victorian Government's Coronavirus Hotline on 1800 675 398 for further advice and information in the event of a quarantining resident or confirmed case of COVID-19.

Are residents required to disclose to the owners corporation if they have contracted COVID-19?

Residents should inform the owners corporation if they are confirmed as having been diagnosed with COVID-19; however, they should only share information that is reasonably necessary for preventing or managing further spread of the virus.

This includes information that the Commonwealth Department of Health says is needed to identify risk and implement appropriate controls to prevent or manage COVID-19; for example, whether the individual or a close contact has been exposed to a known case of COVID-19.

However, SCA (Vic) recommends all residents, and their visitors, undertake best practice to provide a duty not to cause a hazard, or interfere with quiet enjoyment of the common property.

Recommendation 1:

Health, safety and security of lot owners, occupiers of lots and others.

- A lot owner or occupier must not use the lot, or permit it to be used, to cause a hazard to the health, safety and security of an owner, occupier, or user of another lot.

Recommendation 2:

Behaviour of owners, occupiers, and invitees on common property.

- An owner or occupier of a lot must take all reasonable steps to ensure that guests of the owner or occupier do not behave in a manner likely to unreasonably interfere with the peaceful enjoyment of any other person entitled to use the common property.

What should the owners corporation do if they are advised that someone has contracted COVID-19?

Owners corporations in Victoria have a duty of care to maintain common property and to ensure a safe environment for anyone attending the property as a visitor or to undertake work activities.

If you are notified or become aware that a resident has been diagnosed with COVID-19, you must keep their identity and specific location confidential, and only disclose this information to parties that need to know.

The parties that need to know are:

» **Any contractors who service the site**

This allows them to increase their own Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) protocols – please note that contractors only need to know specific details if they are providing a behind-the-door service.

» **The Strata Community Manager and Building Manager as applicable**

They should be advised of which apartment in case something needs to be escalated.

» **Affected Resident**

Provide details to the resident concerned as to what they must do with respect to delivery, visitors, rubbish, and any other property restrictions.

What should the owners corporation do about complaints?

Enforcing any rules is the responsibility of the owners corporation.

An owners corporation should act reasonably, and with common sense in mind, while carefully considering practical solutions to best maintain harmony within the strata community.

What does this mean for the committee (if applicable)?

The committee is the designated representative of all the owners (and by default residents) that live in your property development. You are responsible for ensuring the common property is maintained in a safe condition on behalf of the strata community.

As the peak industry body for the strata industry, SCA has consulted with several professional organisations to develop this guide for owners corporation committees and managers.

If you have a Building Manager, request a copy of their Pandemic Management Plan.

If you do not have a Building Manager, you will together with your Strata Community Manager (if applicable), need to develop your own Pandemic Management Plan (*Figure 1*) and consider a COVIDSafe Plan.

To do this you will need to:

- » Map your dependencies to understand where disruptions might impact your development. For example, greater parcel delivery, more visitors and impact of financial reserves;
- » Review the preparedness of your critical third parties (Fire, Pool, Cleaning, Waste removal, etc.) as these services may be affected;
- » Create a communication platform to inform residents. This could be as simple as a daily or weekly bulletin in the lobby or using technology platforms;
- » List the common areas most at risk for contamination and put in a management strategy for each area.

You will remain responsible for management of contractors visiting the site. However, you are advised to not directly approach contractors.

If you have an owners corporation manager, they will continue to organise your contractors via official work orders if part of their contracted duties. It may be necessary to delay non-essential work/activities on-site at any given time, however this will be done in consultation with the committee as and when required.

Powers of Owners Corporation Committees

The Committee are responsible for the management of the common areas and facilities and may need to create additional policies to manage risks in the event of a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 case.

These new policies may include:

1. **Delivery of parcels to a particular unit/s** – residents may instruct a courier to meet outside or in the lobby area, and not come up to the apartment. If a resident is unable to leave their apartment, arrangements will need to be made with the committee for others to assist.
2. **Visitors and visitors parking** – to manage the risk of exposure to other residents, the committee may recommend restriction on the number of social visitors in line with government protocols, but certainly, the visitor carparks will be restricted for use by essential services such as doctors and medical services as a priority.
3. **Rubbish/waste** – residents may be asked not to use the chute or rubbish room and to double bag the rubbish from bins. Alternative collection methods may need to be implemented while a resident is housebound.
4. **Mail** – the committee may require a resident to make alternative arrangements for the delivery of mail.
5. **Shared facilities** – the committee may determine new access times (hours of operation and closure) of shared community facilities. Facilities such as pools and gyms may also be closed as required.
6. **Shared laundry facilities** – restricted use and/or closure of facilities may extend to communal laundries if residents do not adhere to applicable government guidelines. Residents should be encouraged to take protective measures such as wearing masks (as appropriate), wearing gloves, washing of hands, not touching their face, and disinfecting all surfaces of the machines they use.

Maintain physical distancing where possible when using shared laundry facilities. Owners corporations may recommend use of the hot water setting and use of laundry detergents that contain a bleach compound. (while also including advice to consider the material being washed so that clothing items aren't damaged).
7. **Meeting & Communication** – the committee may implement new meeting and communication protocols to minimise the potential spread of the virus and enable decisions of the Strata Community to continue to be made by an alternative means; *e.g., teleconference, on-line meetings, ballots.*
8. **Building Maintenance & Services** – the committee may determine to increase or reduce services to the building to minimise risks to residents; *e.g., increase cleaning regime, increase waste collection if all residents are staying home and the rubbish generated increases, employ security guards if there is a power failure and the entry/exit security systems stops working or garage doors etc.*

Figure 1 – Sample Pandemic Management Plan

Risk Area	Risk Control	Action
<p>POOL</p> <p>Surface Contamination</p> <p>Social Gathering</p>	<p>Inform users:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That use of pool is at their own risk • To shower before use • Stay in their apartment if they do not feel well. • Implement physical distancing with other users • Sit on their own towels • Wipe sweat with a disposable paper towel, dispose of correctly and wash their hands after. • Exercise physical distancing • Increase cleaning schedule 	<p>Create a sign or multiple signs and place around pool area notifying residents of established protocols.</p> <p>Notify residents of and reasons for closure and affix signs advising of same.</p>
<p>BBQ & COMMUNITY AREA</p> <p>Surface Contamination</p> <p>Social Gathering</p>	<p>Increase cleaning schedule</p> <p>Exercise physical distancing</p> <p>Consider closure of the facility</p>	<p>Authorise and arrange additional cleaning regime.</p> <p>Notify residents of protocols established for use.</p> <p>And/or notify residents of and reasons for closure if this decision is made. Affix signs to advise of protocols established or closure of facility.</p>
<p>TOILET & SHOWERS</p> <p>Surface Contamination</p> <p>Social Gathering</p>	<p>Increase cleaning schedule</p> <p>Exercise physical distancing</p> <p>Consider shutting down the facilities</p>	<p>Authorise and arrange additional cleaning regime.</p> <p>Notify residents of protocols established and reason for same. Affix signs in area of facility.</p>
<p>LIFT ACCESS</p> <p>Surface Contamination</p> <p>Social Gathering</p>	<p>Increase cleaning schedule</p> <p>Exercise physical distancing</p>	<p>Consider hand sanitizer in lobby, request for the interest of all that it not be removed.</p> <p>Authorise and arrange additional cleaning regime to at least daily or more if high use and/or high infection rate</p> <p>Encourage residents to implement physical distancing requirements.</p>
<p>INTERCOM SYSTEM</p> <p>Surface Contamination</p> <p>Social Gathering</p>	<p>Increase cleaning schedule</p> <p>Exercise physical distancing</p>	<p>Consider hand sanitizer in lobby, request in interest of all that it not be removed.</p> <p>Authorise and arrange additional cleaning regime.</p>

Risk Area	Risk Control	Action
<p>LAUNDRY AREAS Surface Contamination Social Gathering</p>	<p>Increase cleaning schedule Mandatory hot wash</p>	<p>Create a sign or multiple signs and place around Laundry to wash their hands before and after using laundry facility, to use detergent and hot water wash and recommend using the dryer to finish.</p> <p>Consider hand sanitizer in room, request for the interest of all that it not be removed.</p> <p>Authorise and arrange additional cleaning regime to at least daily or more if high use and/or high infection rate.</p> <p>Encourage residents to implement physical distancing requirements. A booking system could be implemented to regulate numbers.</p>
<p>FRONT DOOR Surface Contamination Social Gathering</p>	<p>Increase cleaning schedule Exercise physical distancing</p>	<p>Authorise and arrange increased cleaning regime; to at least daily or more if high use and/or high infection rate.</p> <p>Encourage residents to implement physical distancing requirements.</p>
<p>DOOR HANDLES Surface Contamination</p>	<p>Increase cleaning schedule</p>	<p>Authorise and arrange additional cleaning to at least daily, or more if a high use, are with increased risk of higher infection rate.</p>
<p>VENTILATION/AIR CONDITIONING Airborne contaminants</p>	<p>Check if HEPA filters, consider upgrade if not.</p> <p>Advice on improving ventilation https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/Improving-Ventilation-Home.html.</p>	<p>Review ventilation rates – increase fresh air rates if possible.</p>
<p>PLUMBING</p>	<p>Use of substitute paper products as toilet paper e.g., Newspaper, tissues or serviettes is to be discouraged</p> <p>Potential blockages, increasing health concerns and access to services</p>	<p>Convey concerns to all residents of potential problems and how it will impact them and ask them to comply.</p> <p>Notify contractors you will need to engage to fix problems that arise.</p> <p>There is a high risk to a plumber who must clear blocked sewer pipe. Needs to be advised if there is a positive case.</p>

Risk Area	Risk Control	Action
<p>COMMITTEE MEETINGS</p> <p>Surface contaminants</p> <p>Social Gathering</p>	<p>Exercise physical distancing</p> <p>Wipe down tables, chairs, etc. before and after use of committee meeting area</p> <p>Request a Committee Member not attend if they have travelled overseas recently, been in contact with someone who has, or has been in contact with someone who has contracted the virus or is known to have symptoms or has the virus themselves.</p> <p>Consider alternative means of communicating to make decisions.</p>	<p>Notify Committee members of the protocols established and request they comply.</p> <p>Consider alternative meeting solutions like Skype, ZOOM or telephone for discussion then use email ballots to capture decisions and create record.</p>
<p>GENERAL MEETINGS</p> <p>Surface contaminants</p> <p>Social Gathering</p>	<p>Exercise physical distancing</p> <p>Wipe down tables, chairs, etc. before and after use of meeting area.</p> <p>Request Members not attend if they have travelled overseas recently, been in contact with someone who has, or has been in contact with someone who has contracted the virus or is known to have symptoms or has the virus themselves.</p> <p>Consider alternative means of communication and decision making.</p> <p>Consider deferring meeting.</p>	<p>Notify all lot owners of protocols established and request they comply.</p> <p>Consider other solutions like Skype, ZOOM, Voting on-line platforms, postal ballots, etc.</p>
<p>CONTRACTORS</p> <p>Safe worksite</p>	<p>Responsibility to maintain a safe worksite when contractors are engaged to work on the common property.</p> <p>Maintain physical distancing from contractors working on site.</p> <p>Potential threat of coming into contact with the virus.</p>	<p>Committee to avoid contact or approaching trades persons when on site.</p> <p>Work orders to be issued by Committee or strata community management company; continue to require Safe Work Method Statements, which will now include additional processes including PPE and physical distancing measures.</p> <p>Instruct all trades to operate as if someone with COVID-19 resides on site.</p> <p>If the strata community is notified of a person who has tested positive to the virus all contractors must be notified.</p>

Government Information – Useful Links

Website

<https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au>

Staying Safe

<https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/staying-safe>

COVIDSafe Settings

<https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covidsafe-settings>

Property, Real Estate and Strata sector guidance (Coronavirus.vic.gov.au)

<https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-sector-guidance-property-real-estate-strata>

Annual General Meetings – owners corporations

<https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/housing/owners-corporations/meetings-and-committees/annual-general-meeting>

VCAT hearings during Coronavirus restrictions

<https://www.vcat.vic.gov.au/news/vcat-hearings-during-coronavirus-restrictions>

Register to use the Victorian Government QR code service

<https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/register-to-use-vic-gov-qr-code-service>

COVIDSafe Deep Cleaning Rebate (Business Victoria)

<https://business.vic.gov.au/grants-and-programs/covid-safe-deep-cleaning-rebate>

Isolation and quarantine – extra help and support

<https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/isolation-and-quarantine-extra-help-and-support>

Privacy

<https://www.oaic.gov.au/updates/covid-19-advice-and-guidance/>

WorkSafe Victoria

<https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/>

This publication is only a guide. Readers should make and rely on their own expert enquiries. No guarantee is given about the accuracy of the material and no liability for negligence or otherwise is assumed by SCA, its servants or agents in any way connected with this publication.

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Please visit www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au for regular updates.

24/7 Coronavirus Hotline

If you suspect you may have COVID-19 call the dedicated hotline – open 24 hours, 7 days.

 **1800 675 398**

Please keep Triple Zero (000) for emergencies only.

Apartment Living and COVID-19

10 January 2022