

## Our ageing residents

*As strata schemes grow in popularity and more people actively choose to live in apartments and townhouses, the needs of strata communities are increasingly complex. One of the big challenges for the industry is keeping up with the changing dynamics of communities particularly as the population ages.*

Council on the Ageing NSW (COTA) Chief Executive Officer, Ian Day has some ideas for those living in strata to enable them to help their older neighbours.

“The first thing to recognise is that we are an aging population: more than 30 per cent of people living in NSW are now aged 50 years and older. By 2045, one-quarter of the population will be over 65. That will provide some challenges to the strata industry,” Mr Day said.

“When we talk about older people, we’re not talking about a homogenous group with one set of needs. You could have a group of active 80-year-olds who still work, volunteer within the community and are fitter and

healthier than you and I. Alternatively you might have a resident who has some really specific physical or mental health needs who is only 50.”

Older residents can be a great resource, particularly when it comes to strata committees. Often they have more time, skills and depth to offer than some of the younger residents. Engaged older residents can be a real asset for keeping Executive Committees informed about issues as they arise and helping find solutions.

One of the challenges for owners corporations is ensuring the common property is suitable for older people to access or move around in.

“A lot of upgrades and modifications that are great for older people are also great for other residents. For example, if stairs are difficult for some older people then they are usually a problem for small children and mothers with prams. A simple modification to install a grab rail to help going up and down stairs is one way of making life easier,” Mr Day said.

Another problem area for older residents is external areas with uneven surfaces or protruding tree roots and plants overhanging walkways. Leaf litter can also pose a hazard.

“Trip hazards are a big problem for older people, no matter how fit and healthy they are. Simply walking around the property and taking a close look will give a good

indication of potential problem areas,” Mr Day said.

“Where there is outdoor space, providing some sort of shade cover is a great way of encouraging all residents to go outside their apartment. It also increases security; who is going to rob a place that has people outdoors seeing who is going in and out?”

For physical issues, like difficulty accessing apartments via stairs, the Ageing Disability and Home Care, Department of Human Services NSW can provide advice and assistance.

### Contacts:

COTA – visit [www.cotansw.com.au](http://www.cotansw.com.au) or call them in Sydney on 02 9286 3860. Outside of Sydney, dial 1800 449 102.

Alzheimer’s Australia (NSW) – visit [www.alzheimers.org.au/New-South-Wales.aspx](http://www.alzheimers.org.au/New-South-Wales.aspx)

**The Ageing Disability and Home Care, Department of Human Services NSW Home Care Service branch**

Sydney Metropolitan Area -  
1800 350 792

Hunter/Central Coast and rural regions -  
1300 881 144

Aboriginal Home Care Service -  
1300 797 606

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# Children can't fly

*No-one wants a child to be seriously injured under any circumstances, but with a growing proportion of tiny tots calling strata title apartments home it's a mounting risk for the industry. The most serious risks to young children are falls from windows and balconies.*

Senior Lecturer with the Faculty of Law at the University of NSW, Cathy Sherry knows more than most people about the price paid by adventurous young children who are seriously injured in falls. She spent two years working with a cross-section of experts brought together by The Children's Hospital at Westmead to try and reduce the incidence of falls.

"Twelve children are admitted to the Children's Hospital at Westmead every year as a result of a balcony or window fall; I'm aware of two children who fell from windows in the past few weeks. You can probably double that if you take into account the children going to the Sydney Children's Hospital Randwick. And then there are the children outside of Sydney who go to other hospitals where there are also large numbers of apartments, such as John Hunter in Newcastle and Wollongong", Ms Sherry said.

"The biggest problem is fly screens. No fly screen can support the weight of a child. Parents don't perceive a window with a fly screen as an open window but unless they are specifically designed they can't even support a baby's weight.

"Part of the problem with apartments is the size. It's difficult for families not to have furniture pushed up against windows. Most kids who fall are playing in the bedroom, climbing on the bed, or the tallboy, or chest of drawers. Living in an apartment you can't just open the back door and tell the two-year-old to play within sight; it's inevitable in apartments children will be playing inside.

"Children are top-heavy so when they topple they fall head-first. Around most apartments there is concrete, so when you imagine a small child going head-first into concrete you begin to understand how serious the injuries can be.

"Danny Cass (from The Children's Hospital at Westmead) talks about 10 x 10 x 10. It takes \$10 minutes and it costs just \$10 to secure a window so it opens less than 10cm. And that can save a life. Ten centimetres is the width of a child's head; if they can't get their head out, they can't fall out. Rather than having individual tenants or owners do the modification, it's far better to have it coordinated by the Executive Committee so all apartments are brought up to scratch and there's less

chance of breaching water seals."

While one in 10 children currently lives in an apartment in Sydney, this number is growing. In addition to housing prices making apartment living a better financial option for families, more retirees are downsizing into apartments where they have grandchildren come to visit. Research has shown the majority of families living in apartments live in low-income households who are renting their home; almost three-quarters of them have a parent or guardian born overseas.

Another serious risk area is the balcony, particularly older-style balconies with plenty of things children can use to get a foothold for climbing. Low cost solutions include perspex panels which can cover older-style, decorative, low balcony railings; another is affixing shade cloth over climbable elements like balustrades. There are other solutions, but for price-sensitive owners corporations the cheaper options can still save lives.

To download fact sheets on preventing children's falls go to [www.chw.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.chw.health.nsw.gov.au)



# Dealing with defects

By City Futures Research Centre, University of NSW

*Millions of Australians live in strata dwellings, and more will do so in the future as plans for urban consolidation in Australian cities unfold. In Sydney more than 1 in 4 residents already live in a strata property. The long-term success of government plans for urban consolidation will depend on the adequate provision of good quality strata buildings. However, there are underlying concerns about the quality of new buildings, and the adequacy of mechanisms to address these problems in NSW.*

Building defects - faults that have existed since construction or are triggered later on by faulty original construction - impact on the quality and liveability of both private and common areas; affect property values and rental incomes; and can result in ongoing damage to the building.

A recent survey of over 400 NSW executive committee members by City Futures suggests that building defects are a widespread problem, with more than half of respondents indicating that their strata scheme (currently or previously) had defects. In NSW the defects problem is two-fold.

First, there are problems with construction quality. The shift to independent or self certification has allowed more inadequate work to go unnoticed. In NSW, building work must be certified as complying with councils' consent conditions and building standards by certifiers like the Minister for Planning, a local council or an accredited surveyor. As a principal certifying authority (PCA), they will inspect the building during construction and issue an occupation certificate

before people can move in. But while the PCA may certify the building, they may not certify the component parts of the building and, in many cases, work is self-certified by subcontractors. Also, building component manufacturers provide their own certifications and don't always clarify limitations on application and capacity.

Second, owners can face many difficulties in having defects fixed once they are discovered. Scheme operating costs increase to cover emergency and other repairs, investigations and legal actions; owners, committees and managers are distracted from usual management when dealing with defects; and conflicts can arise between all of the parties over how to deal with defects. It is also much more difficult for apartment owners to get defects fixed than it is for house owners partly because:

Strata schemes have multiple owners, which can lead to delays in discovering defects, deciding on the best (technical

and legal) solution, making decisions and implementing actions.

The contract to build the strata scheme is between the developer and builder. The owners corporation is not a party to it and cannot use it to get the builder to rectify the problems. Strata schemes have to rely on statutory rights or negligence claims.

Home Warranty insurance is no longer compulsory for buildings over three stories.

The problems of defects in NSW strata schemes need to be addressed now or they will inevitably multiply with the growth in strata development in this state. By improving the systems for preventing, identifying and addressing defects people investing and living in strata properties can be guaranteed justice, relief and quality of life.

For more information about the research being undertaken by City Futures, visit: [www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/cf/highdensityliving/](http://www.fbe.unsw.edu.au/cf/highdensityliving/)







# Gardens in the sky

*Who says you need to have land to have a garden? With space at a premium in and around most apartment buildings lots of apartment owners are discovering the neglected space on their roof can be turned into a garden that everyone can enjoy*

Just how you get that garden with tonnes of soil, irrigation equipment and plants onto your rooftop is another story.

## The design route

There are a number of landscapers and specialist designers who can work on designing green roofs and rooftop gardens in common areas. Often their projects start when owners realise that they have an area that is tired and needs new life breathed into it. The end result can be a great space which owners can really enjoy and that will also have added value to their apartments.

Many roof areas are underutilised spaces and there are lots of opportunities to make them fantastic outdoor living and entertaining spaces that can be enjoyed by all residents. This also helps to make the entire apartment living experience more enjoyable and more sociable.

Often rooftops are harsh, windy and dry places so make sure you find a designer

who understands this and incorporates this climate in to their designs. The most difficult problems designers also encounter are access during construction, managing residents expectations and raising sufficient funding to construct the works.

## The DIY route

If the budget doesn't stretch as far as a designer and landscaping there is a lot to be said for doing it yourself – as long as all residents are in agreement.

Some local councils are supportive of such initiatives. In the City of Sydney area, residents are using crates mostly provided by the council with some creating an edible garden which is appeals to residents of all ages.

Make sure there are crates or garden beds at different levels to make gardening easier for both all ages including children living in the building. Consider planting a wide variety of fruit, vegetables, flowers and herbs but think

about plants such as parsley and marigolds for the crates or garden beds aimed at the children as they love to be involved and these are plants that are easy to grow.

Innovation is also key in this garden. One enterprising resident befriended some of the local café owners who supply coffee grounds which are mixed in with cheap potting mix to a secret recipe that has yielded great results. They have been given plants by friends and council and have grown from seeds.

Most local councils do have their own sustainable programs and from time-to-time offer assistance to residents. Check with your local council to see what they may have on offer.

## Coming soon

ISTM's Corporate Governance Training online for Executive Committees.

See ISTM website [www.istm.org.au](http://www.istm.org.au) for more details.

## Consumer Awareness Seminars

**You are invited to attend our FREE Consumer Awareness Seminars.**

For the dates and locations of our next seminar, go to the ISTM website.

[www.istm.org.au](http://www.istm.org.au) or call us on (02) 8904 0450

The Institute of Strata Title Management holds regular seminars for consumers to provide information and education on topics of interest to strata and community living, including legislative updates and practical tips from expert speakers.



*Strata & Community Living is a joint initiative brought to you by ISTM; the peak industry body representing strata managing agents and others committed to the continual improvement in standards of strata management practice in NSW and your strata managing agent.*

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