Check decks and balconies for a safer summer outdoors

With warmer weather and the festive season here, the Victorian Building Authority (VBA) is urging homeowners to double check the integrity of their decks and balconies.

The call follows two balcony collapses in New South Wales in the weeks leading up to Christmas, including one on December 23 in which five people were injured, three of them seriously, when the balcony of a first floor property gave way.

The VBA’s Director of Technical and Regulation, Jarrod Edwards, says that while the details of what occurred in both cases is still being investigated, the incidents serve as reminders to owners of properties with balconies or decks of the importance of conducting regular checks and maintenance work.

“Victorians love their decks and balconies but too often they are not aware of the load limits of their structures and have not undertaken a safety check or performed any regular maintenance,” Mr Edwards said.

“Independent research conducted in 2009 revealed that 45 per cent of Victorian households had a deck and/or a balcony. But almost 40 per cent of those surveyed were not aware that decks and balconies need checking and ongoing maintenance even though 27 per cent of decks and 33 per cent of balconies were built between 1960 and 1990.”

Mr Edwards said that the collapse of a deck or balcony could cause severe injury or even death, with the risk greatest when they were heavily loaded at parties and other functions.

“Before planning for a party or gathering, check the condition of your deck or balcony as it may have deteriorated since the last inspection, particularly if the structure is exposed to the elements. It is something that should be done on a regular basis, with the deck and its sub-structure checked annually for any signs of deterioration.”

Termites, rot, corrosion and heavy objects such as large pot plants can impact the integrity of the structure. Things to look for include puddles of water at the bottom of posts or on the surface, rotting or loose handrails, loose or rusted brackets and bolts, cracked concrete and signs of leaning.

For timber decks and balconies, a simple way to check for rot is to test the timber with a screwdriver. The timber may feel soft and spongy if it is decayed. For maintenance checks and all repairs, the VBA recommends engaging an appropriately registered builder or plumber. You should ask to see an official registration card, visit www.vba.vic.gov.au to confirm their registration online or phone 1300 815 127.

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Media enquiries 03 9618 9316
Communications Manager John Rees John.rees@vba.vic.gov.au
Senior Communications Advisor Larissa Bell Larissa.bell@vba.vic.gov.au