Check decks and balconies for a safe summer outdoors

With warmer weather and the holiday season approaching, the Victorian Building Authority (VBA) is urging homeowners to inspect the integrity of their decks and balconies.

The call follows the collapse of a balcony at Point Cook, near Melbourne, in early December that resulted in three people being injured and taken to hospital.

The VBA’s Director of Technical and Regulation, Jarrod Edwards, said that while details of what occurred at the Point Cook property was still being investigated, the incident served as a timely reminder to owners of properties with balconies or decks of the importance of conducting regular checks and doing regular maintenance work.

“For maintenance checks and repairs to balconies and decks, the VBA recommends engaging an appropriately registered builder or structural engineer,” Mr Edwards said.

“Victorians love their decks and balconies, whether constructed of timber, concrete or steel, 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.

“The collapse of a deck or balcony could cause severe injury or even death, with the risk greatest when they are heavily loaded at parties and other functions.

“Before planning a party or gathering that may involve use of a balcony or deck, check its condition for movement since the last inspection, particularly if it is exposed to the elements. Also, make sure the structure is properly fixed to, or that the beams run into, the building. In addition, check the balustrade or handrail and sub-structure annually for any signs of deterioration.”

Termites, rot, corrosion and heavy objects such as large pot plants can affect the integrity of a balcony or deck. Look out for puddles of water at the base of posts or on the deck surface, rotting or loose handrails, loose or rusted brackets and bolts, cracked concrete or signs of leaning. To check for rot in timber decks and balconies, you can test the timber with a screwdriver. If the timber feels soft and spongy it is decayed.

Mr Edwards said checking and maintaining balustrades and handrails was a vital part of a building safety regime. Timber balustrades are more susceptible to the elements than other materials, especially in coastal areas where the combination of salt and rain can be particularly damaging. Steel rails or posts also can be susceptible to rust or corrosion. Painting steel with an anti-rust coating can provide protection against the weather and inspecting them regularly may avoid unsafe rust occurring.

When looking to engage a registered building practitioner to check or maintain your balcony or deck, ask to see an official registration card or visit the ‘Find a Practitioner’ section of the VBA website, www.vba.vic.gov.au, or call 1300 815 127 to confirm their registration.

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