



INSIGHTS

BG ECONOMICS



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STRATA BUILDINGS ARE POTENTIALLY HOTBEDS OF COVID-19 INFECTION

COVID-19 in Queensland Strata Buildings



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The Covid-19 Omicron variant has been wreaking havoc around the world in just a few short months. Unlike the Delta strain, it is considered less dangerous in terms of hospitalisation and deaths however it is much more transmissible.

In Queensland, the number of daily cases has skyrocketed in the past week. On 7 January, Queensland Health reported 10,953 confirmed new cases from 36,492 tests in the previous 24 hours with the total number of active cases being 52,619.¹ The actual number

of cases in the community is expected to be much higher.

Despite the highly transmissible nature of Omicron and the restrictions imposed by the state government on mask wearing indoors, people living in over 50,000 strata buildings are not required to wear masks on common property which includes foyers and lifts where it is often impossible to social distance greater than 1.5m.

Queensland mask wearing rules

There has been a plethora of studies that show wearing face masks, and especially N95 masks, significantly reduce the chance of contracting Covid-19.

Queensland's updated mask wearing requirements, from 2 January 2022, mean masks must be worn indoors everywhere, except in your own home or accommodation.² This includes:

- all indoor workplaces
- public transport and rideshare

- supermarkets and retail shops
- hospitality venues including pubs, clubs and cafes
- cinemas and theatres
- indoor stadium, sports arena or sports centre
- gyms and sport activities
- vulnerable settings like hospitals and aged care
- schools, childcare and other education facilities
- airports and on planes

Masks are not required to be worn outdoors if a distance of 1.5 metres can be maintained from others that are not members of a person's household.

Number of people living in strata buildings

As at 30 June 2021, there were 50,931 community titles schemes ('strata buildings') comprising 512,091 individual lots.³ While lots can also be retail or commercial, the vast majority (likely >95%) will be residential lots.

Using a conservative average of 1.5 persons per dwelling (apartment, townhouse, etc.), approximately 730,000 Queenslanders (1 in 7) are likely to live in strata buildings regulated by the state government under the Body Corporate and Community Management Act 1997.

In a pandemic, that's an important cohort to consider.

COVID-19 in strata buildings

Strata buildings come in all shapes and sizes. Some are small walk-up 'six packs' (six units) with limited common property, no facilities and no lifts. Others are medium and high-rise buildings with hundreds of people living in up to 10 apartments on each floor with multiple lifts, gymnasiums, pools and saunas.

People live in close contact with others, sometimes crowding into small space lifts at peak times in the morning and afternoon when leaving for, and returning from, work. Garbage is disposed of down chutes on each level with little or no ventilation.

The Queensland Government's current policy position is that the management of Covid-19 in strata buildings is a matter for each body corporate:⁴

Bodies corporate and residents should consider the impact of COVID-19 on their body corporate, including what steps may be appropriate to limit transmission of the virus and to look after the interests of all residents and workers in the scheme.

Bodies corporate and their committees have a statutory obligation to act 'reasonably'. This means your actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic need to balance the rights of individuals with the needs of other owners and occupiers and the broader community.

While the government currently considers strata buildings to be a person's 'home or accommodation', the common areas of strata buildings, unlike detached dwellings in towns and suburbs, have a similar Covid-19 risk profile to those indoor places where people are required to wear masks.

Policy change needed

Clearly, the common property areas, and especially the indoor common property areas, of strata complexes/buildings are potentially hotbeds of Covid-19 infection.

In NSW, the peak body for strata owners, the Owners Corporation Network (OCN), in July 2021, convinced NSW Health and the COVID communications team to have mask wearing mandated on indoor common property along with signage, in a number of languages, as well as a toolkit to assist committees and building managers.⁵

However, the NSW state government on 15 December relaxed these measures just prior to the Omicron wave and to date are understood to have not been reinstated. This may change soon.

The Queensland Government should consider as a matter of urgency the NSW response in mid-2021 to assist in smoothing out the current wave of infection which is expected to worsen, putting further strain on the health system and the economy as more people fall ill, lose confidence in feeling safe and undertake self-imposed lockdown.

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1. Queensland Health (2022). 'Queensland COVID-19 Statistics'. www.qld.gov.au/health/conditions/health-alerts/coronavirus-covid-19/current-status/statistics. Accessed 7 January 2022.
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3. Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney-General (2021). 'Common Ground'. Issue 32 – August 2021.
4. Queensland Government (2022). 'Covid-19 in bodies corporate'. www.qld.gov.au/law/housing-and-neighbours/body-corporate/committees-meetings/covid-19. Accessed 7 January 2022.
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