

The Victorian community housing experience with extended COVID-19 restrictions



The Victorian community housing sector's experience of operating through an extended period of COVID-19 lockdown provides a number of insights for the industry.

Relevance

We hope we are through the worst of the COVID-19 crisis, in which case, these lessons are relevant for business continuity planning relating to future outbreaks of infectious diseases possibly including COVID-19.

Some of the lessons are relevant to other situations where services are disrupted, such as after natural disasters. And a couple relate to day to day community housing practices.

In the worst case scenario of a 'third wave' somewhere in Australia, these lessons are directly relevant to all community housing organisations as they operate through the 'third wave'.

How the information was gathered

The information was gathered from three one on one interviews with community housing organisations that experienced COVID-19 cases within their tenant base, and a focus group held with representatives of six community housing organisations and CHIA VIC. The interviews and the focus group were conducted in mid to late November 2020.

We thank CHIA Vic for its enthusiasm and support for the research which included reaching out to organisations on CHIA's behalf and assisting with the focus group.

Lessons for managing through the COVID-19 ‘second wave’

The interviews and focus group highlighted four lessons for community housing organisations updating their business continuity plans to provide for future outbreaks of COVID-19 or other infectious diseases.

1. SINGLE SOURCE OF TRUTH

It can become complicated, confusing and time consuming working through different sources of health advice to inform or update internal operating protocols. A lesson from the Victorian experience is the importance of having an informed process to adopt a trusted, single source of truth – such as a health department – to guide your organisation’s decision-making and health protocols. Once your organisation has adopted a ‘single source of truth’, there’s no need to spend time or resources worrying about what others are saying or doing.

2. APPLY PROTOCOLS CONSISTENTLY

Organisations emphasised the importance of having a standardised or consistent approach to infection control protocols across the whole organisation, so there is certainty that any situation that arises will be handled using the same processes. For organisations delivering services in both Greater Melbourne and regional Victoria, this meant applying the same protocols despite the different levels of risk from infection – at least until government health requirements began to set different requirements for urban and regional locations.

3. MESSAGING TO TENANTS

Victorian community housing organisations relied heavily on tenants to follow health advice and infection control measures, and inform them if they became infected. It was therefore extremely important how communication with tenants was conducted.

Organisations learnt that to be effective, messaging to tenants should be:

- Positive and supportive, not punitive
- Include a clearly stated expectation and process for a tenant to follow if they or someone in their household is infected

- Consistent across all organisational channels such as website, newsletters, Facebook etc
- Consistent with advice from the agency adopted as the ‘single source of truth’. For example, one organisation quickly adopted the practice of pointing to Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) directly from its website. It realised early on that adapting the wording of health advice for different audiences required access to expert information on COVID-19 infection control practices that it could not access.

4. PPE

Organisations learnt the importance of having supplies of full PPE on hand so it is possible to respond quickly if there’s a need to visit a tenancy or move into a hard lockdown.

Although organisations generally tried to replace face to face visits to properties with other activities, there were times when visits were necessary.

Situations that arose included in conducting in-person tenant welfare checks, equipping the police to do tenant welfare checks, managing through hard lockdowns, and doing activities to sustain the tenancy usually done by support organisations.

Like other community housing organisations around the country, Victorian organisations initially struggled to access PPE supplies. Supplies regularised as the pandemic wore on.

The experience with the COVID-19 crisis highlights the importance of considering PPE in business continuity planning more broadly, and keeping some basic supplies on hand at all times.



Deeper lessons from the experience

Beyond the lessons for managing through a situation like the ‘second wave’, there are a number of additional lessons that community housing providers can draw from the Victorian community housing sector’s experience.

Maintaining staff wellbeing

The ‘we can do it’ enthusiasm of the first wave lockdown waned quickly in the second lockdown. Proactive strategies for managing and maintaining staff wellbeing became necessary.

Organisations responded with strategies that many organisations employed in the first wave, such as daily or weekly check ins. But also, strategies involving more significant resourcing such as sending out employee welfare packs, implementing dedicated wellbeing programs for employees to access from home (meditation, exercise etc), and giving extra time off in recognition of the increased hours and intensity of work.

LESSON: Include adjustment of employee entitlements, benefits and wellbeing programs in your organisation’s pandemic readiness plans.

Be ready for a ‘hard lockdown’

The experience of outbreaks in Adelaide in late November and Sydney in late December illustrate how swiftly situations can change.

Some organisations participating in the interviews and focus group provided services in the public housing high rise towers that were put into hard lockdown. An event that took many by surprise. A significant lesson learnt was that everything that needs to be in place to support tenants during a hard lockdown must be arranged before the hard lockdown starts. It’s not practical to expect to arrange support, supplies and logistics once a hard lockdown has begun.

LESSON: Pandemic plans need to consider arrangements for hard lockdowns in high risk locations.

Plan to review and monitor

Not only is it important to have and implement a business continuity plan covering the various different areas (IT, working from home, customer service protocols, tenancy and property management) – it’s important to continuously monitor the operation of the plans. And be ready to review and refine as new information becomes available.

In the context of the second wave in the Victoria, organisations found they needed to take a risk management approach, continuously updating and refining their strategies as they learnt more about government health requirements and the types of situations that could emerge. This was particularly the case for strategies to manage cleaning and sanitizing of properties considered high risk for spread of infection, and protocols for visiting properties and meeting with tenants or residents. Occurrences of tenant or resident infection were managed within these plans, protocols and internal governance arrangements.

The length of the second wave lockdown meant organisations reallocated resources internally to lead and resource these activities. For some organisations this involved ‘temporary’ structural changes.

LESSON: Pandemic plans should make provision for the possibility that extended periods of implementation, monitoring and review will be required.



Cleaning and sanitizing

Increased cleaning and sanitation measures are very costly but also proved to be an important preventative strategy in rooming houses and medium and high density apartment blocks.

Community housing organisations did not find it easy to fund the increased costs associated with these measures over an extended period. Some discussed having to make very difficult decisions about the balance between the preventive role of twice a day versus once a day additional cleaning and sanitizing, and their organisation's capacity to fund it.

Organisations deployed a number of strategies to keep rooming house residents safe including extra cleaning, not filling vacancies, temporarily moving residents, and increased tenancy management or support worker presence at the accommodation. These strategies worked successfully but came at a considerable financial cost to the organisations involved. Organisations have concluded that rooming house accommodation is not a sustainable housing option for community housing organisations to offer in a long term COVID-19 environment.

LESSON: Long term requirements to implement infection controls such as additional cleaning and sanitizing has the potential to undermine the financial sustainability of community housing operations.

Support services

Just as each community housing organisation decided its own COVID-19 service delivery arrangements, so did each support organisation. Some maintained outreach services, some had offices open, some provided phone services only, some continued services but struggled with staffing shortages or prioritising services to rough sleepers staying in hotels, some ceased service delivery entirely. Community housing organisations around the country are aware of the challenges for managing tenancies that this situation created. Each community housing organisation had to find out how its support providers were operating and work that information into their management plans.

In the context of an extended lockdown, Victorian community housing organisations found that their ability to negotiate mutually satisfactory arrangements with support organisations was determined by the quality of their relationship pre-COVID. Where there was a strong and collaborative relationship, it was possible to work systematically through the challenges to find solutions that continued to support vulnerable tenants and residents. When the relationship wasn't as strong, it was harder.

When support organisations couldn't maintain outreach services to tenancies, community housing organisations found themselves filling the gaps, including going out to visit tenants when there were problems.

LESSON: Involve support partners in the development of pandemic service delivery plans.

Managing tenancies

Some organisations discussed challenges managing tenancies with very limited direct face to face contact for an extended period. Other organisations did not raise this as a particular challenge of the extended lockdown. Possibly, like the experience with support organisations, the nature of pre-COVID relationships played a role. When organisations did experience challenges, they seemed to relate to social rather than affordable housing tenancy management.

Some organisations experienced increased complaints relating to disruptive tenant behaviour and some experienced an escalation in the disruptive behaviours being complained about. They found that not being able to visit tenancies and talk face to face to tenants, or arrange for support services to do this, slowed down their ability to respond to complaints and gather evidence for Tribunal action. They also had fewer options to re-engage if tenants stopped engaging by telephone.

Like many community housing organisations around the country, organisations struggled with public perceptions that tenancies could not be ended during the eviction moratorium. The VCAT¹ appeared reluctant to end tenancies for anti-social behaviour or other breaches, and tenants seemed to have more success than usual getting help from legal services to defend Tribunal applications.

A couple of organisations felt the experience had improved their internal practices by teaching them to engage more with complainants as a source of evidence, and sharpening their focus on evidence gathering.

LESSONS:

Consider specific processes and resources for managing tenancy breaches in pandemic service delivery plans.

Avoid over-reliance on in person communication modes in standard tools and processes for managing tenancy breaches

1. Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal

Finding out about tenant or resident infections

Organisations relied on their tenants to tell them if they or someone in their household became infected. Issues arose when tenants were in hospital and weren't well enough to advise. Some organisations were contacted by hospitals when tenants or residents were admitted, but the reason for admission was not always clear.

None of the organisations interviewed were contacted by contract tracers. Several organisations gave examples of situations where another agency or organisation knew of an infection amongst their tenancies but didn't tell them, seemingly due to confidentiality concerns. Sometimes support providers informed the community housing organisation of an infected household. Whether this occurred seemed to depend on the community housing provider's relationship with the support organisation.

When there was an infection, organisations stopped all visits to the property, informed other tenants there was an infection in the building and possibly reviewed cleaning of common areas, depending on the scenario. Infections in rooming house accommodation required additional measures to secure the safety of other occupants.

LESSONS:

Encourage tenants and residents to inform their housing provider if they test positive for an infectious disease, and make it easy for them to do so.

Involve support partners in the development of pandemic service delivery protocols.

Relationships with government

A challenge that was almost universally raised by the Victorian community housing organisations was getting timely advice from the DHHS. This challenge persisted throughout the second wave and was experienced even where pre-pandemic relationships were strong and energy was put into developing improved arrangements.

Organisations emphasised that individual DHHS personnel were both responsive to their requests and well intentioned in seeking to respond to them, highlighting the systemic nature of the challenge.

Victorian organisations concluded the barrier was DHHS's operationally limited understanding of the role of community housing organisations, their financial constraints, and why independently regulated organisations without recurrent funding from DHHS were seeking advice from DHHS about management of social housing related scenarios.

In addition, the DHHS offered limited internal expertise to answer specific questions about the details of following government health guidelines. These specific questions mostly seemed to relate to management of rooming house sites and possibly also reflected DHHS's limited understanding of community housing operations.

LESSONS:

Although investing in relationships with government agencies is a critical on-going activity for community housing organisations and sector representatives, it is not enough by itself. There is also a need for stronger government understanding of the services and business models of the community housing sector so that government's health and crisis management expertise can be tailored and applied to the community housing context in a crisis. The sector including state and national CHIAs should continue to highlight this need and work with government to build relationships and their understanding of community housing.

There is a role for sector level pandemic plans encompassing defined roles and responsibilities including a key point of contact within key government agencies who is responsible for ensuring providers have appropriate contact points within the agency as pertinent to the crisis. These may need to be negotiated at a sector level with key position holders within key agencies or sections of agencies.



Areas for collective effort or industry advocacy

The experience of Victorian community housing organisations points to some areas for collective work or industry advocacy falling into four broad areas.

1. COLLECTIVE INDUSTRY FORUMS

Feedback from community housing organisations gathered by CHIA during the COVID-19 crisis emphasises the usefulness of collective industry forums for information exchange and problem resolution in a crisis. In this vein, the discussions with Victorian community housing organisations highlighted the value of the practical support provided by CHIA Vic through-out the extended lockdown.

These forums may also have a role in supporting industry readiness for future pandemics or natural disasters including activities such as:

- Developing scenario planning frameworks
- Developing collective approaches to barriers that arose during the COVID-19 crisis such as access to PPE and the need for cross agency information sharing protocols that appropriately balance tenant or resident privacy with the health and safety of community housing employees

2. BCP NETWORKS OR PROTOCOLS BETWEEN COMMUNITY HOUSING ORGANISATIONS

The experiences of community housing organisations in Victoria with COVID-19 suggest there could also be a role for operationally focused, networks or protocols between organisations to facilitate resource sharing in response to crises.

In the Victorian situation, such arrangements could have been useful for organising responses to additional cleaning and sanitizing costs, supporting infection control management in rooming houses, negotiating location specific arrangements with support organisations, or managing COVID related tenant relocations.

In a natural disaster situation, networks could operate to support organisations in the centre of the disaster with disaster recovery activities.

To be effective, such networks would need to be negotiated between individual organisations as part of business continuity planning. However, there is a role for collective industry forums in developing supporting frameworks and tools.

3. MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The experiences of community housing organisations in Victoria during the COVID-19 crisis underscore the importance of regular relationship management with government agencies to:

- Educate key position holders on the role of community housing organisations and the community housing sector
- Negotiate agreed roles and responsibilities and communication protocols for when urgent situations arise.

Relationships with the government agency responsible for housing are front and centre for community housing organisations. However, in relation to COVID-19, the Victorian experience was that relationships with health authorities were also important. In the context of preparation for and recovery from natural disasters, it's the relationship with local government that is critical.

There is a role for industry level work to educate government agencies and incorporate communication protocols with a range of government agencies into individual organisation business continuity plans. Such work can only be successful if there is stronger government understanding of the services and business models of the community housing sector so that government's crisis management expertise is able to be tailored and applied in the community housing context.



4. CRISIS RELATED COSTS

Something CHIA has heard repeatedly from community housing organisations during the COVID-19 crisis is that standard community housing funding arrangements do not allow for extraordinary costs associated with operating through crises and disasters. This issue was raised early on by a number of smaller organisations in interviews and surveys conducted by CHIA.

The discussions with Victorian organisations highlighted the cost burden associated with on-going additional cleaning and more intensive management of properties with shared facilities. Organisations funded these additional costs in order to keep housing people but some were struggling financially after managing these additional costs for months.

There is room to build government recognition of the need to plan for extra costs associated with continuing provision of community housing services through a business continuity crisis or natural disaster. Extra costs are a legitimate expense associated with crisis response or disaster recovery, and in a direct government service delivery scenario would be funded by internal transfers within government.

Although the COVID-19 crisis ultimately did not affect the use of particular types of properties by community housing organisations, in a natural disaster situation, there are often additional costs associated with repairing properties and providing interim accommodation options for tenants and residents. Additional property management costs also need to be considered part of extraordinary crisis or disaster recovery funding arrangements.



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