



TIPS TO RUN A BETTER ROOMING HOUSE

RAAV has gathered many case studies and comments from stakeholders which demonstrate the value of implementing best practice in rooming houses. Here are some examples gathered during research for the Rooming House Best Practice Handbook.

FIRE SAFETY TIPS

Fire safety

The Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) has provided some basic and helpful safety hints to make residents aware of the basic requirements in the home. MFB's research reveals that 43.8% of fires in rooming houses originate in kitchens and 29.1% originate in bedrooms. The main causes of fires were:

- Cooking left unattended;
- Misuse of electrical equipment (overloading, illegal wiring);
- Electrical appliances;
- Smoking.

The key vulnerable factors for residents in rooming houses are cultural issues, language barriers, lack of fire safety awareness, mental health, alcohol and drugs

It is the legal responsibility of all owners and landlords of rental properties to install and maintain working smoke alarms. The common observations by fire-fighters are lack of smoke alarms, overcrowding in rooms, dead-locks and locks on internal doors, impaired egress, overloading of electrical equipment, portable cooking equipment unsuitable for individual rooms, no fire emergency and evacuation plans.

Fire checklists

You should maintain a checklist of items that may have an impact on residents' safety. Make sure you:

- check that smoke alarms comply with locations in the rooming house
- do a regular full check of all smoke alarms (decibel, button, sensitivity tests), planned battery replacement (checking the expiry date), and maintain inspection reports on file (monthly)
- check ducted heating and clean the vents every two years
- maintain cooking appliances (regularly)
- check fire extinguishers and cooking blankets (every six months)
- check that entrances and exits to the property are clear (ongoing)
- check emergency lighting and/or exit signs (every six months).

You should also develop relationships with police, fire stations, ambulance, medical services and other services to identify how they would react to an emergency.

A **fire and evacuation manual** can give rooming house staff the information and preparation they need to organise the safe evacuation of residents in an emergency. RAAV can give you more information about developing a fire evacuation manual.

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Hoarding in rooming houses is a fire trap

Hoarding is a condition where a person accumulates food and other items in their home, leading to rooms becoming cluttered to the point where they can no longer be used for their designated purpose. Hoarding can cause potential fire and other health risks.

Rooming house operators are not necessarily aware of the dangers that this can cause to other residents and their businesses.

Commonly hoarded items include personal papers, newspapers, clothing, furniture, appliances, household rubbish, animals and hard rubbish. Hoarders find it difficult to dispose of items and do not recognise the safety issues associated with hoarding because:

- Accumulation of possessions results in an abnormally high fuel load and greater opportunity for ignition;
- Blocked exits and narrow internal pathways impede escape for the occupant and access for fire fighters;
- Non-functional gas or electricity may result in unsafe practices for cooking and heating.

To reduce the potential risks of cluttering, check the utilities that are connected, prioritise removing clutter from around cooking area and stove tops as 39% of fires in hoarding homes result from cooking. Ensure clutter is removed from around heaters and electrical items and discourage the use of open flames. These factors combined account for 44 % of fires in hoarding homes

The Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) provides advice on how to identify clutter, assess the level of hoarding and develop a program to counter this threat. For more information, visit mfb.vic.gov.au and type 'hoarding' into the search field.

Education can overcome fire risks

The risk of fire in your rooming house can be minimised through a well thought out and implemented education program for the residents by explaining:

- Keep the stove top, griller, oven, range hood and cooking area free from built up grease, dust and oil as cooking in the kitchen is the single largest cause of fires in a home.
- Should a fire start, a fire extinguisher and fire blanket should be within easy reach but away from the cooking area. Show the residents how to operate these important appliances and check that they are physically and mentally able to use this equipment safely.
- Discourage smoking in bed.
- Ensure that electrical appliances like hairdryers and laptops are not left on bedding. Monitors, laptops, televisions and other equipment should have good air flow around them.
- Avoid using double adaptors and use power boards according to manufacturer's instruction. Never overload power boards and have them checked regularly for damage.
- Keep curtains and other combustibles away from open flames. If candles, incense and oil burners are permitted for social, religious or cultural practices, tell the residents to extinguish them before leaving home or going to sleep.
- Clean the lint filter in washing machines and clothes dryers regularly after use and always let the clothes dryer complete its cool down cycle before stopping it.
- Fire risk is greatest at night when residents are asleep as they can lose their sense of smell. Working smoke alarms save lives and they should be checked monthly, batteries changed yearly and dust around the outside cover cleaned.
- Fires caused by heating appliances increase in the winter months so ensure the residents turn off all portable heating before leaving home or going to sleep.

It is vital that the residents know what to do if a fire occurs. Have an evacuation plan prominently displayed and conduct regular fire drills.

CASE STUDY 1: IDENTIFYING AND DEALING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

RAAV was privileged to have two speakers at a recent Information Forums which dealt with mental illness in rooming houses. In summary:

- Knowing the resident is the most fundamental issue in identifying mental illness. Understanding triggers that promote mental illness is important. It is only by having a pre-existing relationship with these residents and knowledge of their behaviours that you will be able to identify subtle shifts in their mental health such as poor personal hygiene, missing appointments or a change in diet. It is important that the operator identifies these triggers quickly.
- Rooming house operators can minimise mental stress by:
 - reducing over crowding
 - employing a cleaning service - to coincide with “bin day” if possible.
 - Undertaking regular/prompt maintenance

Experienced housing workers cannot stress these issues enough. They regularly have residents complain about the physical conditions of the rooming house they are living in and the impact it has on their lives.

- An information board containing the contact details for essential services including council support services, local community housing organisations, mental Health services (such as Beyond Blue, Suicide line), a list of GP surgeries in the area available will be valuable. Making this information available sends a message to the residents that there is help available if needed.

HELPFUL HINT

Undertaking a mental health first aid course may assist residents’ wellbeing should they harm themselves.

CASE STUDY 2: MINIMISING CRIME IN ROOMING HOUSES

According to the Victorian Police, 80% of all crime is opportunistic and all crime is committed by 6% of the population. The common issues police deal with at rooming houses are:

- Thefts – often caused by complacency of the residents. Sometimes residents also steal from each other;
- Assaults;
- Drunks and drug affected people;
- Those with mental health issues;
- Criminal damage.

Proven crime prevention strategies should be in place. Residents should be screened, references checked and emergency contacts kept up to date.

Identification of property is also a deterrent and residents should be encouraged to secure valuables in their room or a secure area.

CASE STUDY 3: HOARDING IS A FIRE TRAP IN ROOMING HOUSES

Rooming house operators are often confronted with hoarding by residents but are not necessarily aware of the dangers that this can cause to other residents and their business.

The Melbourne Fire Brigade (MFB) provides sound advice on how to identify clutter, assess the level of hoarding and develop a program to counter this threat which will enable you to:

- Assess a level of hoarding,
- Engage an affected individual ,
- Develop policy and practice in relation to what actions need to occur in relation to specific levels of hoarding such as engaging the occupant, providing a warning, referral to other services, etc.

Swinburne University are national leaders in the treatment of people affected by hoarding. They state that compulsive hoarding is where individuals have difficulty discarding items leading to living spaces kitchens, bedrooms, lounge rooms, etc. becoming cluttered to the point where they can no longer be used for their designated purpose.

For example, people may no longer be able to cook in the kitchen, or may not be able to sleep in their beds due to their "stuff" getting in the way. A link to the program is

<http://www.swinburne.edu.au/lss/psychology/pc/compulsive-hoarding-group.html>

CASE STUDY 4: MANAGING VISITORS IN ROOMING HOUSES

A well established rooming house has implemented strict rules covering visitors to ensure common areas, toilets, bathrooms and kitchen are only used by paying guests and their legitimate visitors. They have produced the following procedure.

Office Staff Guidelines

Check the Incident\Communications Book at the start of each shift.

Visitors

Visiting hours are strictly 10.00 am to 9.00 pm. No visitors may enter the premises outside these times.

During Visiting Hours

- The Visitor Sign-In book should be accessible at all times during visiting hours
- Residents must sign in any visitors – where practical anyone wishing to visit a resident must make prior arrangements to be met in the foyer to be signed in (*note visitors, including overnight visitors are not permitted to sign-in other visitors*)
- Non-Residents are not permitted to enter the building unaccompanied by a resident.
- Any non resident found to be in the building unaccompanied, should be asked to leave immediately. If a non-resident refuses to leave the premises, they should be informed that the police will be called.

After Visiting Hours

- The front door should be locked after 9.00 pm and only residents are permitted entry after that time.
- Visitors remaining in rooms after hours will be considered Overnight Guests of the resident, and the resident's account will be charged accordingly – fee \$40.
- The rear fire-exit should be closed and monitored at all times. Check that the back door is shut periodically to prevent non residents from entering after hours.

Residents

- If you are unsure of a resident's status, please verify by asking them to show their room key or receipt.
- Residents remain responsible for their visitors at all times and must not allow them to access common areas or other resident rooms unaccompanied or make excessive noise during their visit.
- Any damage caused by a resident or visitor, should be noted in the Incident book for follow up.

CASE STUDY 5: GOOD FACILITIES KEEPS A CLASS 3 ROOMING HOUSE FULL

William operates a Class 3 rooming house which is a converted residence/dormitory and caters for mature aged males. All rooms have shared bathrooms and toilets. The kitchen is well appointed and has an adjacent meals area. The meals area is seldom used as the residents usually cook in the kitchen and take the meals back to their rooms.

Being in an excellent condition and near to transport, the turnover of residents is very small and averages about one or two per year. The operator takes referrals from agencies that he trusts and follow up on the placements.

William's philosophy is to give residents clean surroundings and they will respond in keeping the premises and their rooms in similar condition. There are no house rules and he counsels the residents verbally about key issues like keeping the place tidy and not to make a nuisance to the other residents.

CASE STUDY No. 6: CREATING A COMMUNITY SPIRIT

A courtesy implemented by one operator is to acknowledge residents' birthdays. Most residents do not have family ties and saying "happy birthday" builds up a good rapport with the residents.

This rooming house also holds regular barbecues where residents are invited to a sausage sizzle in a local park and about half of the residents turn up. This creates a community feeling and encourages interaction between the residents and the operators, helping to reduce tensions in the rooming house.

CASE STUDY No. 7: INCREASING THE BOTTOM LINE BY KEEPING GOOD RESIDENTS

James maintains that if you provide good quality furniture, furnishings and facilities, you will have a lower turnover of residents hence improving the bottom line through an assured and steady income. His 16 room rooming house has an average of one or two vacancies each year.

Residents have shared bathroom, toilet and kitchen facilities and he presents the rooms like a hotel room. Each single room is about 12 sqm and are furnished similar to what the residents would find in a motel – a good bed and mattress, fridge, table and chair, wardrobe, carpet, hot water, toaster, jug, crockery and cutlery. He inherited many loyal residents and they do additional chores like gardening at their own volition. No wonder his residents include 2 with over 30 years residency, 3 with over 20 years and most the rest around 8 to 12 years occupancy with only one under 3 years.

CASE STUDY No. 8: REGULAR MAINTENCE ENHANCES BETTER MARKETING OPPORUNITES

Jonathan maintains his property in A1 condition and implements a “preventative maintenance” philosophy. The property is painted out every 5 years on the inside and every ten years on the outside. The operator maintains the grounds and gardens in good condition which adds to the ambience of the property. The residents are complimentary and use these facilities. Jonathan says there are benefits of maintaining high standards which include:

- Maintenance costs do not blow out unexpectedly;
- The gardens and general ambience of the property attract future residents;
- High retention rate of residents;
- Easier to let vacant rooms;
- Creates a competitive edge in the locality against lesser maintained rooming houses;
- Easier to manage.

CASE STUDY NO. 9: KEEP THE BOTTOM LINE IN FOCUS

It is important to:

- Keep rents at market value;
- Adjust rents annually to at least meet inflation and issue notices for non-payment promptly;
- Rent single rooms rather than shared rooms as shared rooms are more difficult to manage and can take longer to rent;
- Set a goal for acceptable level of operating profit;
- Install coin operated washing, drying and vending machines;
- Access economical insurance and services;
- Provide unlimited internet access but provide limited downloading;
- Minimise bad debts by diligent and on-time rent collection.

CASE STUDY No. 10: REDUCING ENERGY COSTS BY “USER PAYS”

Keeping control of the little expenses that can eat into the profits is important, e.g. turning off heaters when not required helps to keep down electricity costs and subsequently rents.

Installing separate electricity meters to the rooms is an effective energy cost control method where this is a practical option. This “user-pays” principle encourages residents to be mindful of the costs and use less electricity and improves the operator’s bottom line. The separate meters also assist in keeping rent increases to a minimum as residents are billed monthly and they can verify their usage via the meter. This also introduces safety benefits by reducing the energy load within the building as all circuit breakers are not highly loaded. The circuit-breakers last longer and this also increases safety of the residents.

CASE STUDY No. 11: CONTROLLING ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

The house rules in a rooming house for students has rules about alcohol consumption that are explained and signed by the residents on arrival and are strictly enforced. Students may have wine or a beer with dinner and have alcohol in moderation outside in the garden but binge drinking is not allowed or tolerated. One new resident tried to ignore these conditions and brought a slab of beer for consumption into the back garden area. He was stopped and was subsequently asked to leave the premises.

CASE STUDY No. 12: LOOKING AFTER DIETARY AND SANITARY REQUIREMENTS

Janet is aware that most of their overseas residents are not used to a lot of the food and beverages available in Australia. She has posted a professionally produced dietary chart in the kitchen which outlines the various types of food, their calorific and health issues and this is appreciated by the residents.

The toilets are spotless and there are signs advocating personal hygiene, e.g. "Please wash your hands before and after using the toilet". There is antiseptic soap provided in all toilets and communal wash basins.

CASE STUDY No. 13: HELPING A RESIDENT INTO PRIVATE RENTAL

Steven had been a resident for about 2 years. He believed he could never 'escape' living in a rooming house environment. After much encouragement by the rooming house operator to apply for private rental and after several referrals, he was eventually successful and relocated with his partner and child. He has now lived in private rental for over a year.

CASE STUDY No. 14: SETTLING IN A NEW TENANT FROM A BED-SITTER

A new resident moved into the rooming house from a bed sitter. The case manager advised the rooming house manager to treat the new resident with kid gloves as there were some problems at his former residence due to a drinking issue.

The rooming house facilities are small in comparison to the previous accommodation but it has a courtyard which suits the resident's smoking habit. During the first week, the move proved to be quite traumatic. After a couple of days, the new resident became dishevelled and was smelling of alcohol. Alarm bells started ringing when the resident declined a voucher for a free barbecue.

The manager recognised the signs of withdrawal and asked the operator of the property to meet with the resident and have a "mate to mate" talk. He identified that a conflict had occurred between the resident and a long-term user of a facility on the property. This was sorted out and within a week, the resident had a clean appearance, was using the clothes washing facilities, participated in communal activities and found new companionship from fellow residents and visitors.

The lesson learned was that the resident had been plucked out of his secure bed-sitter environment which was his home and he now found himself in a foreign environment. The manager recognised that he had to move quickly before a deep seated future problem arose.