

"TO BE OR NOT TO BE 9c"?

It is now official; the new Building Code of Australia (BCA) 9c building classification came into force as from the 1st July 2002.

Owners and designers can now design to the Commonwealth's "Ageing in Place" requirement with some certainty of their design being accepted by the Local Authorities.

What are the main criteria to have a building classified as a Class 9c?

Firstly, and most obviously, the building must be intended to be used for "residential accommodation of aged persons".

Secondly, the residents have varying degrees of incapacity due to the ageing process and there is 24 hour personal care services provided by staff that can assist residents in an emergency evacuation.

Thirdly, the building must have a residential fire sprinkler system in accordance with AS 2118.4 installed throughout.

If any of these three criteria are not met then the building cannot be classified as a 9c building under the BCA.

The Aged Care 9c Working Group is currently developing a 9c non-sprinkler option. We hope that this non-sprinkler option will be adopted within the BCA by July 2003.

Will I have to convert my existing building to the new 9c classification?

No, you are not automatically required to change your existing building to the new 9c classification. The current Hostel (Class 3) and Nursing Home (Class 9a) BCA classification will remain. However, if the current use of the building has changed from its original approved use as stated on the Occupancy Permit/Certificate, then you may be in breach of the building code.

How will I know if my facility needs to change to the new 9c classification?

Some owners and tenants of facilities across Australia have progressively changed the use of their buildings from a Low Care Hostel to a High Care Nursing Home without changing or reviewing the level of fire safety systems within their facility.

The fire safety systems in a Hostel Class 3 building as defined under the BCA were not designed for residents undergoing medical treatment who would need assistance to evacuate.

The fire safety requirements between a Hostel and Nursing Home are very different.

There is a misunderstanding that the BCA allows up to 10% of residents in a Hostel needing full time nursing care before they are required to change their Occupancy Permit to a Nursing Home.

In actual fact, the BCA allows up to 10% of the floor area of a building to be used by another classification before the higher fire safety system applies to the whole building.

The key issue here relates to 10% of the floor area not 10% of the number of residents, therefore, if one or more of the Nursing Home residents use more than 10% of the floor area of the building then, the higher fire safety requirement must be applied to the whole building.

Can my existing Hostel facility be converted to a 9c facility?

A fire sprinkler protected Hostel (Class 3) generally meets most of the 9c requirements with minimal cost associated with upgrade works required. In most cases the main costs in a non-sprinkler protected Hostel is the retrofitting of a residential fire sprinkler system.

Other issues outside the BCA building requirements relate to staff ratio for high care and low care residents and associated costs, demographics of demand in area, bed licences, etc. I am not going to discuss these issues in my article but will try to give an overview of the BCA issues.

Some of the areas where we have found an existing Hostel building will need to be upgraded includes:-

- (a) Whether the building has a residential fire sprinkler system to AS 2118.4.
- (b) 24 hour personal care staff on site.
- (c) Smoke separation of the kitchen if it is over 30m² and the laundry if it has commercial type dryers.
- (d) The floor area of the building may need to be divided into smoke compartments not exceeding 500m².
- (e) The distance to a designated exit will need to be considered.

The travel distances have increased but it is taken from further back into the room and not from the door.

- (f) Some disabled access requirement may need to be upgraded to AS 1428.1 especially in older Hostel buildings.
- (g) Additional fire extinguishers may be required due to the deletion of fire hose reels.
- (h) Grab rail coverage in corridors is required to both sides.
- (i) Doorway width requirements are much wider in a 9c than a Hostel.

A doorway into a resident's room is required to be 1070mm except for Victoria where the doorway need only be 900mm wide.

- (j) Corridors only need to be a minimum of 1500mm wide between obstructions as long as they are widened to 1800mm past doorways.

The fire alarm and detection systems currently installed in a Hostel should comply with the new 9c with some modifications.

An existing Hostel should have no problems in meeting the 9c sound insulation requirements between resident's rooms of an Rw of 45.

The existing ensuite configuration to service residents with higher care needs is another major issue that is not considered under the BCA. The cost to adjust the ensuite to allow for fully assisted use may add significant costs to a project.

Where do I go to get advice on converting my Hostel to a 9c?

Firstly, you need to engage a suitably qualified consultant such as a Building Surveyor, Architect, Draftsperson, etc. with demonstrated experience in Aged Care and working knowledge of the new BCA 9c requirements.

The appointed consultant will need to review the existing Hostel and identify the most cost effective solution for any upgrade works needed.

A building permit approval may also need to be obtained for the upgrade works identified in the review.

If you are not sure or do not know any experienced Aged Care Consultants, then contact your aged care industry association, they are always a good source of information and contacts.

For any further information on the BCA 9c requirements contact Peter Chenoweth, C.H. Group Building Surveyors and Aged Care Certification Consultants on (03) 9775 0871.