

# Delay to removal of flammable cladding from NSW apartment buildings



By **Matt O'Sullivan**

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A state government project to remove flammable cladding from apartment towers has been put on hold until next year, with the NSW Building Commissioner blaming the COVID-19 lockdown for the delay.

Some 239 apartment buildings – most of which are in Sydney – housing thousands of residents have been deemed high-risk and are under orders to remove combustible cladding.

The government originally planned for work to start on removing cladding from the first building [late this year](#), as part of a remediation project it wants to be completed by late 2023.



Smoke billows from a 20-storey apartment building on fire in Milan in northern Italy on Sunday.AP

NSW Building Commissioner David Chandler, however, has told industry groups the regulator expects work to start on remediating the first buildings in February.

Mr Chandler, whose office is overseeing Project Remediate, said design work, and deciding the order of the first buildings to have cladding removed, was expected to begin as soon as COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

“We estimate the project is between four and six weeks behind schedule. But we are on track to begin assessment and triage works in the coming months, and remediation works will commence straight after the traditional summer break in the trades industries,” he said.

“COVID-19 has impacted the construction industry and how we can operate through lockdown.”

The government’s timeline for replacing dangerous cladding from buildings deemed at high risk has come under attack from Labor and the Greens, which have accused it of acting too slowly.

The latest delay comes almost seven years after a fire in Melbourne’s [Lacrosse](#) apartment tower, which was fuelled by combustible cladding, revealed the dangers of materials used on high-rise buildings across the country.

The [Grenfell Tower](#) blaze in London in 2017, which claimed the lives of 72 people, further heightened concerns worldwide.



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Greens MP David Shoebridge, who is chairing another parliamentary inquiry into building standards, said the program had been “under funded and under prioritised” by the Coalition government.

“More than four years on from Grenfell, we still don’t have a single piece of cladding removed as part of Project Remediate,” he said.

Mr Chandler said flammable cladding was a worldwide challenge, and it was hard to “go a month without hearing that there is some event around cladding”.

On Sunday, a fire quickly [engulfed cladding on the facade of a 20-storey apartment tower](#) in Milan in northern Italy, destroying the building. No one was seriously injured.

Mr Chandler said he had met many owners of apartment buildings with flammable cladding who were “feeling very stressed about the experience that they’ve found themselves in”.

“We know that a lot of apartment owners who bought their projects some years back didn’t see this coming,” he said.

But he said he was hopeful the project would “relieve some of those stresses” and the building watchdog would provide a high level of oversight of it.

Owners will be able to apply for [interest-free loans](#) to pay for the cost of removing and replacing dangerous cladding. The government has estimated the average cost to remove cladding from the buildings deemed high risk at \$4 million each.

Better Regulation Minister Kevin Anderson said the owners of more than 60 buildings had registered interest in the project, and he expected the number to “grow considerably” by the end of the month.

Hansen Yuncken, the company managing the project, said it was scheduling buildings for cladding removal based on risk, complexity and readiness. That included the size and scale of the work, and operational risks assessed by Fire and Rescue NSW.

“Typically, triage, design and construction work will take around 12 months for the average building,” Nick Jacobs from Hansen Yuncken said.

“Some buildings will have longer or shorter durations, depending on the scale and complexity.”