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ESSENTIAL GOODS AT MERCY OF COVID SHORTAGES AT DISTRIBUTION CENTRES

Staff crisis hits food supply

SIMON BENSON
POLITICAL EDITOR

Major retailers including Coles and Woolworths are reporting staff shortages of up to 35 per cent at their distribution centres due to state-imposed Covid-19 isolation requirements forcing the nation into a deepening supply chain crisis for essential goods including food and pharmaceuticals.

The Australian understands several of the nation's top retail chief executives have reported to Treasury that their furloughed workforces had reached critical levels, with more than a third of workers off sick with Covid-19 or classified as close contacts.

Retailers and the shop workers' union on Sunday called on work-

ers to be allowed out of isolation the moment they test negative for the virus, as the nation's ports warn the economy must sort out the supply chain crisis in days instead of weeks.

It comes as Scott Morrison on Sunday called a meeting of cabinet's national security committee to address the crisis, and supermarket and retail outlets apologise to customers for shortages.

Despite the limited options for federal intervention, the two-hour meeting is understood to have agreed that changes to isolation requirements should be extended beyond food supply chains to include aviation, essential services, child care and education.

The Prime Minister on Sunday said Omicron had forced a "gear change" to his government's re-

Perrotet backs free RATs to get kids to school on time

STEPHEN RICE

The NSW government is determined to have students back in the classroom on the first day of term later this month despite surging cases of Covid, with Premier Dominic Perrotet

response to Covid-19, but that the nation would adapt quickly to respond to supply chain issues.

"We have one of the strongest records when it comes to dealing with Covid-19. We have one of the highest vaccination rates in the

world, lowest death rates and strongest economies," he said.

"We have achieved this by taking an evidence-based approach, led by our medical experts. We will continue to do exactly this, and ensure Australians stay safe and

our country stays safely open."

Mr Morrison also said a mandated return to school on time in the first week of February was needed to avert further worker shortages in critical sectors, despite Queensland's announce-

ment it would delay a return to the 2022 year by two weeks.

Last night it was confirmed Governor-General David Hurley and NSW Governor Margaret Beazley had tested positive for Covid.

With the nation's retail supply chain confronting "unprecedented stress", the Australian Retail Association and Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association followed other critical sectors in calling for isolation rules to be amended to help mitigate widespread and growing Covid absenteeism.

The ARA and SDA called for retail workers to be allowed to return to work as soon as they test negative; a timely and efficient reporting mechanism for rapid tests; and, the end of "onerous" requirements for reporting workers'

test results to multiple agencies.

A letter co-signed by ARA chief executive Paul Zahra and SDA national secretary Gerard Dwyer sent on Sunday night urged Mr Morrison to provide retail workers with access to free rapid antigen tests.

"We urge you to consult with the states and territories to provide free, immediate and appropriate priority access to rapid antigen tests to essential, frontline retail workers in stores and distribution centres and associated measures to help reduce pressure across the sector," the letter said.

One in five ARA members had reported up to 50 per cent of their staff currently were affected by isolation, Mr Zahra said.

Mr Dwyer expressed concern Continued on Page 4

Ex-GG's attacks on three PMs

EXCLUSIVE

TROY BRAMSTON
SENIOR WRITER

Governor-general Sir Paul Hasluck sharply criticised John Gorton, William McMahon and Gough Whitlam to the Queen, trashed his former Liberal colleagues, despaired over policy drift as the Coalition cascaded to defeat, was concerned about the speed of Labor's decision-making and lamented the "poor state" of Australian politics.

Hasluck's secret vice-regal letters between 1969 and 1974 have been opened for access by the National Archives of Australia, along with the correspondence of Sir Richard Casey, Sir Zelman Cowen and Sir Ninian Stephen. It amounts to over 1100 pages.

The Hasluck letters - requested by The Australian before and after the High Court ruled the correspondence was an official record subject to the 20-year release rule in May 2020 - chronicle the downfall of the Gorton and McMahon governments, and the coming to power of the Whitlam government.

The governor-general expressed concern to Buckingham Palace about Gorton's style of governing and labelled some ministers as "oafish", "prone to lapses into silliness", with "no qualification" or lacking "brain power", in November 1969. Hasluck, a former minister in the government, described Gorton's private secretary, Ainsley Gatto, as "a bumptious little hussy of twenty-three" that same month.

When a party-room motion of confidence in Gorton's leadership was tied in March 1971, and the prime minister resigned, Hasluck said he had not seen the "coming danger quickly enough" amid widespread discontent and treachery, and handled a dispute with Malcolm Fraser over civil aid in Vietnam in a "clumsy" way.

"Mr Gorton the ambitious, intelligent and well-intentioned politician, has been betrayed by Mr Gorton the impetuous and self-centred man," Hasluck wrote to Sir Michael Adeane, the Queen's private secretary. "Behaving thoughtlessly, at times rudely, often without consideration for others and sometimes defiantly, he has played into the hands of his opponents and rivals and has alienated some who would be his friends."

McMahon's elevation to prime minister reflected the "sad picture" of Australian politics and the "weakness" of the Liberal Party, Hasluck reported. McMahon was described as without character, devious, a leaker and plottier, and not trusted. He presided over a "low talent" ministry, possibly the worst post-war, Hasluck wrote in September 1972.

"His term weakened the cabinet system, undermined the public service, made public relations exercises even shoddy than usual, lowered respect for the prime minister, and eroded trust," Hasluck said of McMahon after the Coalition lost the December 1972 election.

While Hasluck regarded Whitlam as a good prime minister, he was critical of his period as opposition leader, questioned

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Households pile their cash into mortgages

EXCLUSIVE

SIMON BENSON
POLITICAL EDITOR

Australian households are on average almost four years ahead on their mortgage payments, with a record \$50bn funnelled into offset accounts over the past two years as homeowners used the pandemic to pay down their loans.

This is on top of more than \$170bn in additional savings across other accounts since the outbreak of Covid-19 primed to drive the highest forecast consumption rates in two decades, according to new data from the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority.

The savings boom fuelled over two years of the pandemic comes as Josh Frydenberg warned that the economic recovery was not yet locked in, with the Omicron wave posing a "serious" health and economic challenge for the nation.

New data from the banking regulator provided to The Australian shows that average households were 45 months ahead of principal and interest mortgage payments, with offset account balances surging by almost \$50bn since the start of the pandemic.

This was at the highest rate since 2008 when APRA began collecting data. There was now almost \$370bn sitting on household and business balance sheets combined, with part of those savings expected to drive a household spending surge this year.

The Treasurer, still recovering from a Covid-19 infection after

testing positive last Friday, is in isolation at his Melbourne home with his wife Aimee - who has also contracted the virus - and their two children, one of whom tested positive on Sunday.

He said he had experienced the common symptoms, including fever, cough and lethargy, but was on the mend.

"The rapid spread of the Omicron variant is a reminder of the serious health and economic challenges we face," the Treasurer told The Australian.

"We are not out of this pandemic, the recovery is not yet locked in and we cannot be complacent. But despite the challenges of Covid-19, households are well positioned to get ahead on their home loans thanks to a combination of record low interest rates, unprecedented support from the Morrison government and a significant increase in savings.

"This is confirmed by new APRA data showing the average borrower with a principal and interest mortgage is now 45 months ahead on their scheduled repayments compared to 32 months at the start of the pandemic, while the average offset account balance has halved by almost \$20,000 over that same period.

"This means Australians can pay down their mortgages faster, while critically they are reducing their interest payments and strengthening their personal balance sheets with some \$220bn in savings that was not there before the pandemic."

This was based on 5.16 million principal and interest mortgage accounts. The APRA data also showed borrowers with an

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Ashes foes draw out drama to last ball



Crowded by Australians, England's Stuart Broad defends against spinner Nathan Lyon in the last moments of the fourth Test; and below, Ash Barty

WALLY MASON

One of the world's best batsmen bowling, one of the world's best bowlers batting. The SCG fading into twilight, nine Australian players crouched around the bat. Sitting in the dugout, Ben Stokes couldn't watch, pulling his shirt over his eyes as Steve Smith bowled the final over of the fourth Ashes Test to England's James Anderson.

The veteran paceman survived and England hung on for a draw, showing the sort of fight that had previously been missing in an Ashes series Australia has already won, 3-0.

This was the unrivalled theatre of Test cricket. World tennis star Novak Djokovic, bidding his time in a modest Melbourne hotel room as he fights to be allowed to stay for the Australian Open, was Australian sport's sideshow all weekend.

Earlier on Sunday, Australia's Ash Barty provided the curtain-raiser, getting her summer off to a perfect start by claiming the Adel-



aided International title.

But the main event was out in the middle at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

"We have the audacity to talk about such things as dead rubbers in Test cricket," said former Australian captain Ricky Ponting. "There is no such thing."

In a Test that featured twin centuries from recalled batting hero Usman Khawaja and gutsy performances from a host of En-

gland's walking wounded, it came down to the last ball on the last day.

When bad light forced the umpires to rule that Australian captain Pat Cummins could only use spinners with three overs to go, Smith - who started his Test career as a bowler - stepped up.

Jack Lesch was poised to take centre stage as the hero, until Smith struck with his first Test wicket since 2015 to set up a

Tennis Australia's pleas were rebuffed

Tennis Australia officials pleaded with the federal government late last year to check the paperwork of players before they travelled to Melbourne for the Australian Open but were rebuffed by department officials.

New letters have emerged as detained world champion Novak Djokovic prepares to have his case heard on Monday

FULL REPORT P4

and it could have gone either way. Australia's push for a 5-0 whitewash is now lost, but no one seemed to be complaining. Even Cummins described it as a "great game of Test cricket".

Earlier, Barty raised hopes of more sporting theatre to come when she took less than an hour to post a runaway 6-3-6-2 victory over Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan in the Adelaide International. The Australian Open remains Barty's major goal and she will carry the hopes of a nation that hasn't seen a local man or woman win an Australian Open singles title since 1978.

But the Djokovic sideshow will step on to centre stage at 10am on Monday when lawyers for the Serbian star stand up in the Federal Court in Melbourne and argue that Australian Border Force was wrong to scrap his visa because he was unvaccinated.

The hearing will be live-streamed. Pull up a chair for sport's next great theatrical performance.

SPORT P24

WA ignores health chief advice on alcohol crisis

EXCLUSIVE

PAUL GARVEY

Western Australia's influential chief health officer urged the McGowan government to consider sweeping alcohol restrictions across the troubled Kimberley and Pilbara regions before the state instead adopted the hospitality and liquor industry's preferred model of a banned drinkers register.

A report prepared by state chief health officer Andy Robertson - whose Covid advice has been un-

mended the government consider either banning or restricting the sale of mid- and full-strength alcohol across the state's north, where problem drinking in Indigenous communities has fuelled violence, crime and health crisis.

Dr Robertson's submission - dated December 2020, just as a banned drinkers register trial was beginning in the Pilbara, and about six months before a similar program began in the Kimberley - recommended restrictions on the sale of mid- and full-strength alcohol across the regions, or alternatively the introduction of volume restrictions. The APRA data was not mentioned.

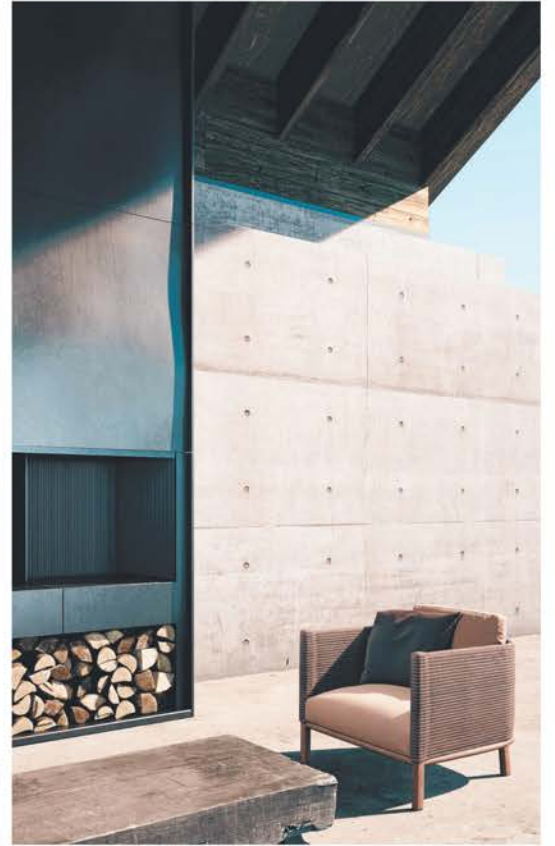
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INTERIOR

motives

The turmoil of the 2020s has had a marked effect on our living spaces, but don't rush blindly into change

DIVYA VENKATARAMAN

It's been a strange two years in the world of interior design. As boundaries blurred, we began to figure home differently in our minds. Children's needs encroached on work, work calls were taken from the couch, schoolwork spilled out on to the dining table, and socialising, when it was allowed, often felt safer en plein air on a friend's terrace or in your living room than in the jostle of a crowded city bar on a Friday night.

As we came to experience life more and more in the cocoon of our homes, they were no longer the beacons of rest and relaxation that they once were. They became multifunctional, multipurpose spaces, burdened by the expectation to fulfil every one of our needs.

The shape of home, for many of us, changed. Our place within it is still being redrawn. And, as we move into a new year, it's not surprising that many of us feel the need for a refresh.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 saw record highs in construction and home renovations. Many were spurred on by government stimulus aimed at getting the construction industry back on its feet.

But many of the decisions we made in those times were reactive choices that reflected the middle-space we found ourselves in.

Quick decisions rose to meet urgent needs, such as setting up a home office space or a study space, while longer-term projects, designed to fulfil our deeper wants as individuals and families, were sidelined.

Now, as we settle into a new year, many of us are rethinking the way we've been living, and reflecting on how we can better use and enjoy our homes.

"The people who inhabit a space can be powerfully impacted upon emotionally, mentally and physically through the atmosphere embodied by the space around them," says interior designer Alessandra French, director of State of Kin.

"The creation of space is not only about the visual experience of 'looking beautiful', but also the more tactile, atmospheric and emotional experiences that can be generated."

To get some guidance on how

to move forward (as well as the trends to look out for), we asked interior design experts for their tips on a home refresh.

When in doubt, opt for simplicity

While design's recent embrace of overt maximalism and the frothy quality of the popular grand-millennial trend may have boldened and brightened our interior tastes of late, there's always room for laid-back simplicity. The fashion minimalists of previous decades may have been banished from runways, but in homewares, light, bright spaces with clean lines and sparse furnishings are ever-popular.

According to Sam Fazzari, founder of Mobilia, a designer homewares and furniture boutique, many of us are responding to stress and confusion by seeking out spaces that have "a calming effect".

"We are seeing more of a reductionist approach to design whereby less can sometimes be more within an interior," he says. "This allows for key pieces to have room to breathe and become more like objects of art."

With the world in tumult around us, "our homes have become our sanctuary more than ever".

Play with nature

But creating calm in the home doesn't have to mean sterility. Find a sense of groundedness with natural fibres and earthy pieces that give a sense of nature and a feeling of tranquillity, suggests Fazzari. Think rippling, tactile walls, neutral colour palettes and soft, undulating curves.

After the past two years, is it any wonder we're comforting ourselves through soft, yielding fabrics? Textural pieces of furniture, like fuzzy stools or upholstered chairs, can add an element of homeliness to a space, as can layered throws and tactile rugs.

According to Alex Hopkins, of Melbourne-based interiors firm Studio Tate, they can also "bring a purity and quality" to home projects.

For French, embracing the soft and natural means taking inspiration from our local landscapes -



a sensible option, given that both designers and consumers have been affected by the lack of availability of imported materials and designs during the pandemic. Opt for Australian floral motifs, or employ a colour palette of dusky greens and slate greys in an ode to this country's rugged bushland.

Take an artful approach

Though we may have once loved the art in our homes, like a decades-long marriage having to look at them day in and day out can dampen the allure.

When you're ready for a home refresh, instead of going straight for demolishing walls and razing countertops, turn your gaze to smaller changes. Like art.

While art can be intimidating - and expensive - to commit to, Megan Dicks, co-director of Melbourne's Otomys Gallery along-

side Hannah Abbott, has seen an upswing in interest in art collecting during the pandemic, which she puts down to an increase in time spent inside the home.

For Dicks, a new artwork placed in a prominent location, such as the dining room, "can have a transportive effect".

It gives the illusion of having changed so much more in the house, while also making it feel as though it's been imbued with a new spirit. Similarly, she says, "smaller works add nuance and intrigue", and give the effect of "layering the home with depth, personality and meaning".

Fazzari agrees, saying artwork is a great way to add "depth and extra personality", without making deep, structural changes to a home.

As for what kind of art you should be buying? Dicks predicts a spike in interest in landscape painting, both abstract and tra-

ditional", as well as the continued pull and clean simplicity of minimal art.

Fortunately, "art doesn't follow visual trends at the same pace as fashion or décor", so it's safe to let your personal attachment to a piece be your touchstone.

"The right work of art is the work which resonates with you because the choice is personal and should be meaningful - it's as simple as that."

Look beyond aesthetics

Whether it's a pair of party shoes or an entire kitchen cupboard system, the allure of the latest trend can be tempting.

But it's important to look beyond the aesthetics - and not just to practicality and what surface is easiest to clean. French encourages a consideration of the "tangible moments" to be experienced in a space: "the flow of movement, textures, light, even smell that might

Clockwise from top left: The Giro collection by Vincent Van Dusen for Kettal; Clifton Hill residence by Studio Tate; Bodyscape Yoga in Perth, designed by Slate of Kin; Otomys Gallery's Megan Dicks and Hannah Abbott



be made manifest" within it. "Is it a busy, energetic space that needs to be durable, bright and motivating?" she asks. "Or is it a sanctuary space that calls for quiet, calm and softness?"

Ask yourself the questions before committing to that expensive (beautiful) lounge whose shiny leather upholstery actively repels any form of lounging.

A durable home

Refreshing your home doesn't have to be a wasteful process. Practice "conscious minimalism", a philosophy French is exploring in her designs.

It doesn't necessarily align with the clean lines and crisp neutrals of the aesthetic style, but borrows from it in a sense, putting the focus on mindful, careful curation of objects that reflect the self.

While trend-based pieces are tempting, a more sustainable approach necessitates the embrace

of a more timeless style: she recommends focusing "more on sourcing investment items that have meaning and longevity".

"My suggestion would be to, over time, invest in art, furniture and objects that you love and will cherish in years to come," says French.

Fill your home with "things that are experiential in their value, that have meaning" behind them, she says.

Another way to practise sustainability in the home is to upcycle what's around you. Look around to see what can be salvaged: repurposed chairs, dye bed linens, and swipe some varnish on to a mantelpiece for a bold new look.

For an even lighter touch, consider how you could make a difference in your home by switching up some key interior elements: moving furniture around is the first, most obvious example.

Make a splash

If you're the type for self-expression through colour, there's never been a better time to refresh your home. As upbeat "dopamine dressing" was for the runways, so the eclectic Memphis-Milano revival trend is for interior design.

"It's bold and not for everyone or every space, but the bravado of the movement is a lot of fun," says French. Think graphic black-and-white patterns, primary colours clashing with swathes of pastel and a touch of fluorescence, spiced with geometric shapes and wavy, structural lines. "Very daring!"

But there are also ways to be bold without committing to a room rendered entirely in fuchsia: colour and pattern can be used sparingly, and often, for greater effect.

"We have never been afraid to harness the power of vibrant colour," says Hopkins, of Studio Tate, a design studio that's a master of bold hues, carefully considered.

"When applied intelligently, working confidently with colour is a form of expression that rewards the brave."

Go slow

While it's tempting to rush into decisions, to take the spirit of the renovation and follow it to the hilt, Hopkins recommends stepping back from your plans to see how they will actually manifest.

"Our consistent advice is to take your time," she says. "Decide what brings you joy and how your interiors can work to support your individual lifestyle."

"Everyone is different; however, considering your functional requirements, and how they may change over time - for example, a growing family or a downsizing couple - will ensure you get the most out of your investment and a home you truly love."