

# Regional Development Strategy for Gozo 2021 - 2030

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The Gozo Business Chamber's Feedback to the Public Consultation Document

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**THE GOZO BUSINESS CHAMBER**

## 1. Introduction: A Shared Vision for Gozo

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The Gozo Business Chamber would like to highlight first its overall agreement with the vision portrayed in the document and reiterates its belief that the establishment of the Gozo Regional Development Authority is an important step in giving Gozo its due place in the national policy agenda.

In the past there were steps in this direction such as for example the Eco Gozo Vision Document (2009). However, these were not sustained over the longer term to encompass a truly holistic vision for our island.

The underlying statement of intent which is that of creating productive employment and wealth while safeguarding the wealth and interests of future generations should be the main element of this strategy. As Gozo faces multiple challenges including that of diversifying the Gozitan economy, and the overdevelopment which is currently happening in Gozo, this strategy should assist Gozo in continuing to move forward sustainably.

## 2. Priority Area 1: Gozo Spatial Planning and Sustainable Urban Development

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The Chamber agrees with this priority area relating to Gozo's spatial planning and sustainable urban development and agrees with the actions proposed in the document. The 'Carbon Monitoring Scheme' especially should help to create further awareness on the importance of achieving carbon neutrality on the island. This in fact should be seen within the overall objective of the island of Gozo achieving carbon neutrality prior to Malta. The Chamber also agrees with proposal M1.2 relating to a multi-level ecological car park in Victoria. The latter proposal could also include small public transport vehicles which would transport people from this car park to various other areas in Victoria.

The Chamber would also like to include the following proposals with respect to the measures being proposed under M1.1 'Regeneration of Low-End Real Estate' and 'M1.10 Carbon Monitoring Scheme'. These proposals were also included in the Chamber's budget proposals for 2022:

### Development

- Creates schemes **specific for Gozo** targeted towards the renovation of old houses. Incentives should be intrinsically tied to making a building more energy efficient and lessening its carbon footprint. Specific schemes could **identify for example particular areas, such as the city centre of Victoria, where a number of old buildings are currently unused and being left in a dilapidated state.**
- **Houses which are bought to be renovated and lived in, and not redeveloped into apartment blocks would fall within a reduced property tax regime.** Though this should apply both to houses within and outside the urban conservation areas (UCAs), **a more favourable tax regime should apply on houses outside UCAs.** Due to the present policies, the impact of the replacement of houses with large apartment blocks, is greater in development zones outside the UCAs.

### Sustainable Urban Development

- **Increased incentives for Gozitan residents to shift to electric vehicles** including: (a) better refunds when they purchase an electric vehicle; and (b) better charging rates on the private charging infrastructure in Gozitan homes.
- **Reduced ferry tickets for Maltese residents crossing over to Gozo with electric vehicles,** and better rates when they charge their vehicles on Gozo's public charging infrastructure.
- **The complete shift of Gozo's public transport system to smaller, and more frequent electric buses.** Larger buses, which can also be electric, or hybrid would only be maintained between the main routes such as that between Mgarr and Victoria.

### **3. Priority Area 2: Infrastructure and Accessibility**

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The Chamber agrees with all the proposals contained in this section. It would also like to remark with respect to two (2) proposals which the Chamber believes are of utmost priority for the island of Gozo at the moment: M2.4 'Mġarr Harbour Expansion' and M2.7 'Increased Medical Capacity'.

With the increasing economic development experienced on the island of Gozo, and the increase in the number of services being offered from the island, the port of Mġarr has become increasingly congested. Its expansion is now an essential next step to maintain and increase the present level of accessibility to the island.

The need for a new hospital for Gozo to complement the existing investment in the 'Queen Mary University of London campus' in Gozo is also a necessity. The campus of the 'Queen Mary University of London' has been a significant success in Gozo, with a number of foreign medical students now located here in Gozo to follow their studies. However, this investment would be useless if it is not complemented with a new hospital which would not only cater for the needs of the local population but would also expand its services to cater for people residing in Malta, and also foreigners.

### **4. Priority Area 3: Economic and Talent Development**

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The measures contained in this section are all important. M3.2 'Enhance all national business promotion schemes for business in Gozo' is crucial. All business promotion schemes should be positively skewed towards businesses located in Gozo.

The Chamber also positively notes measure M3.13 'Creating a spirit of Entrepreneurship among Gozitan youths'. The Chamber has for the past 3 years organised the 'Youth 4 Entrepreneurship – Gozo' award. The scope of this award is to incentive youths to pitch their business idea relating to Gozo. However, much needs to be done. Gozo in this sense needs a new generation of innovative entrepreneurs. To this end the Chamber will be willing to collaborate on this initiative.

### **5. Priority Area 4: New Economy**

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The diversification of the Gozitan economy is of utmost importance at this particular stage. Presently the Gozitan economy is reliant on certain sectors such as tourism, construction and real estate. A number of sectors offer considerable potential for the island including for example the deployment and testing of carbontech solutions prior to these being deployed on a national level. As regards digitalisation the existing infrastructure is already in place with the deployment of the second fibre optic link between Gozo and Malta, and the Digital Innovation Hub in Xewkija. The latter can be managed as an incubation for companies in the digital sector. To this end an international call for expression of interest could be issued for specialised companies to manage this incubator.

### **6. Priority Area 5: Sustainable Tourism**

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As regards this section the Chamber would like to comment on M5.5 'Annual Anchor Events'. In this area the Government should seek to move from organising events itself to partnering with the private sector. The events need to be high calibre events organised by the private sector or non-governmental entities. A call for expression of interest could be made in this sense with a panel of experts who would evaluate the submissions and choose the events in question.

### **7. Priority Area 6: Social Development**

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The Chamber agrees with measure M6.1 for the establishment of a 'Gozo Centre for Social Innovation and Research'. Gozo needs research in this area which would assist the formulation of policy in the social sphere. While there is a lot of discussion on the social trends currently being experienced in Gozo there is not the data which would assist in the formulation of the required solutions to tackle these

issues which included for example: the increasing ageing population, the concentration of migrants and social cases in particular localities, and youths moving permanently to Malta.

## **8. Priority Area 7: Rural Development and Eco Gozo**

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The preservation of Gozo's rural heritage remains important for Gozo and measures targeted towards consolidating land parcels and incentivising the entry of young farmers by facilitating access to government owned agricultural land should be encouraged.

## **9. Priority Area 8: Culture, Heritage and the Arts**

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Culture remains an important niche which has so far been undervalued in terms of its economic potential. Gozo's bid to be the European Capital of Culture in 2031 if awarded could prove the ideal platform to continue to promote Gozo as an island of culture.

To this end M8.6 'Strengthening the Voluntary Sector' should be given priority as the majority of the cultural initiatives undertaken in Gozo are done by the voluntary sector.

As regards 'cultural governance' (M8.8) rather than creating another committee, one should think about creating a focused agency in Gozo manned by specialists in the sector, which role would be to liaise with the private and voluntary sectors on the creation of new events, while sustaining also traditional events.

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