



Dedicated to promote the interests
of the Maltese maritime sector

Position Paper

The Views of the Malta Maritime Forum on the Grand Harbour Revival Plan

1. Introduction

The Malta Maritime Forum recognises the importance of the Grand Harbour Revival Plan (GHRP) and welcomes the Government's objective of revitalising and enhancing one of our Islands - and indeed the Mediterranean's - most iconic maritime locations.

However the Grand Harbour is not only a heritage waterfront or tourism destination. It is primarily and fundamentally one of Malta's primary maritime gateways and a cornerstone of national economic sovereignty and security.

Whilst the Forum supports any initiative aimed at improving the competitive and environmental aspects, it is steadfast in its belief that certain essential conditions are satisfied. To this end, it believes that all elements of the regeneration plan must be complementary and most importantly, the Plan must seek to preserve and strengthen its core strategic function: enabling maritime connectivity and complementing the commercial maritime activities upon which Malta's economy and society depend.

In this light, having actively sounded its members, the Forum hereby submits its views on the Grand Harbour Revival Plan as part of the national consultation process. The Forum therefore reiterates its position that maximum attention is given to:

- 1) holistic long-term planning,
- 2) independent Nautical Risk Assessment, and
- 3) the safeguarding of operational continuity for existing port users and service providers

2. The Strategic and Economic Importance of the Grand Harbour

As an island state, Malta is entirely dependent on maritime connectivity. Unlike continental Europe, Malta has no alternative land transport routes linking it to markets on the continental mainland. Thirty per cent of seaborne domestic cargo entering and leaving the country is transported in and out of Malta by sea through Roll-On Roll-Off vessel services calling at Valletta Port.

The Grand Harbour plays a crucial role in facilitating:

- The importation of essential goods, including food, fuel, pharmaceuticals, industrial inputs and consumer products.
- The export of Maltese goods and services.
- Passenger connectivity through ferries, cruise vessels and other maritime transport services.
- Strategic maritime services such as ship repair, bunkering, maritime logistics, and offshore support operations.

In addition to its economic importance, the harbour forms a critical component of national resilience. In times of crisis or disruption, maritime access remains Malta's only physical supply route.

For this reason, the Forum strongly emphasises that the Grand Harbour must always be treated as a critical national infrastructure. Planning decisions that affect its quays, manoeuvring areas, hinterland logistics facilities or maritime operational capacity must therefore be evaluated with the utmost prudence.

The Forum therefore reiterates a principle it has consistently advocated: function must always take precedence over form when planning the long-term development of the Grand Harbour.

3. Support for Regeneration and Future Growth

The Malta Maritime Forum is aligned to the concept of a revived, reorganised and embellished Grand Harbour that accommodates economic growth while improving the overall environment and usability of the port area.

The Forum recognises that the harbour faces multiple and often competing demands on its limited shoreline, creeks and surrounding hinterland. These demands include commercial shipping, ship repair, bunkering operations, cruise activity, ferries, leisure maritime uses, tourism infrastructure and urban regeneration.

A well-designed regeneration plan can potentially deliver benefits by:

- Improving the organisation and utilisation of port space.
- Upgrading infrastructure and facilities.
- Enhancing public access and the urban environment.
- Encouraging investment and innovation within the maritime sector.

However, the MMF believes and stresses that such regeneration must not come at the expense of curtailing cargo operations or movement of commercial ships and it should not result in:

- a) Giving priority to new functions and activities inside the Grand Harbour if these can be easily accommodated elsewhere
- b) Any irreversible limitation on the harbour's functionality or its ability to accommodate present and future maritime operations.

The Forum therefore, whilst supporting the project in principle, must underline that technical studies and related planning process have to conclude that the proposed mix of activities can safely coexist and that commercial maritime functions remain adequately safeguarded both now and in the foreseeable future.

4. Importance of Independent Nautical Risk Assessments

Central to the Forum's position is the need for comprehensive Nautical Risk Assessment studies. These studies are essential to determine:

- The navigational boundaries of the harbour.
- Safe vessel manoeuvring areas and traffic flows.
- Acceptable proximity between commercial shipping, passenger vessels, leisure craft, ship-repair and marina facilities.

Such assessments must also consider the potential need for supporting infrastructure improvements, including:

- Dredging
- Breakwaters or wave protection structures
- Quay reinforcements
- Navigation and traffic management systems

The Forum has noted Government's reassurances that the necessary technical assessments are being conducted and that planning decisions shall be guided by their findings. The Forum looks forward to reviewing these when available.

5. Safeguarding Commercial Maritime Operations

The Grand Harbour continues to host a wide range of commercial maritime activities which form an integral part of Malta's maritime ecosystem. These include:

- RORO operations
- Shipping and cargo handling operations
- Cruise Operations
- Ship repair and maintenance
- Handling of cement, aggregate, scrap metal and general cargo
- Handling of grain
- Catamaran service, Ferry and Passenger Vessel movements
- Base for Towage Services
- Base for Pilotage Services
- Home port for service launches that provide services offshore
- Discharge of tankers
- Bunkering operations and fuel logistics
- Offshore support activities
- Midstream operations
- Movement of fenders and hoses for ship to ship operations
- Lay up of vessels
- Yacht marina

Many of these activities rely on specific quay infrastructure, hinterland storage areas, and access routes that have developed over decades.

If elements of the Grand Harbour Revival Plan require the relocation or reorganisation of existing operators, the Forum must obviously insist that adequate alternative facilities must be identified, allocated and fully operational before any displacement takes place. The completion of the multi-function quay at Ras Hanżir is key in this regard.

This is essential to ensure:

1. Seamless continuity of port operations
2. Protection of existing concessions and investments
3. Stability within the maritime services sector
4. Preservation of employment and economic activity

Relocations should therefore form part of a holistic and carefully sequenced plan, they must be considered as primary considerations and not treated as secondary considerations.

Besides, planning to concentrate all cargo operations on one side of the Grand Harbour has its merits in aiming to reduce traffic flows to different parts of the port and maximising the use of port equipment and storage areas. However, these advantages can only be fully realised if a proper assessment is undertaken of the quay occupancy within the Grand Harbour to ensure that such a measure does not create congestion resulting in vessel waiting time which is anathema to attracting additional cargo related business to the Valletta Port.

Moreover, the planning process taking place behind the Grand Harbour Revival should also focus on maximising the natural resources of the Grand Harbour. Therefore, sea areas which enjoy natural depth would best be utilised for accommodating vessels with deep draft. Leisure craft and yachts which need very shallow waters can be accommodated in areas which do not have deep waters.

6. Future Maritime Trends and Infrastructure Requirements

The maritime sector is currently undergoing significant transformation. These changes must be fully considered when planning the long-term development of port infrastructure.

Key trends include:

Growth in Vessel Size

Physical limitations in the Valletta Port are intensifying over time not merely due to organic expansion in business across the Island but also because in the Industry, many vessel categories — particularly Ro-Ro, Ro-Pax and passenger vessels — have increased significantly in size over the past two decades. Larger vessels now require:

- Longer and stronger quays
- Greater water depth
- Larger turning basins
- Enhanced traffic management

Any planning decisions that reduce operational flexibility today risk limiting Malta's ability to accommodate different and larger vessel classes in the years to come to the detriment of Malta's connectivity and economic prospects at large.

Energy Transition in Shipping

The maritime industry is also undergoing a major transition towards lower-carbon fuels. However, there is currently no single dominant alternative fuel. Various solutions remain under consideration, including:

- LNG and bio-LNG
- Methanol
- Ammonia
- Hydrogen
- Hybrid-electric systems
- Shore power infrastructure

Ports will therefore require flexible infrastructure capable of supporting multiple fuel types and storage systems. This may require additional space for:

- Fuel storage
- Bunkering operations
- Safety exclusion zones
- Shore-side power installations

For this reason, when considering commercialising existing port areas and spaces, one has to plan beforehand the harbour's ability to complement the maritime energy transition.

7. Need for Holistic Long-Term Planning

The Forum strongly advocates a comprehensive and integrated planning approach for the Grand Harbour.

Such an approach should:

- Safeguard critical commercial port functions.
- Ensure compatibility between tourism, leisure and maritime logistics activities.
- Provide clear relocation strategies for affected operators.
- Maintain flexibility to accommodate future maritime trends.
- Preserve navigational safety and operational efficiency.

Where appropriate, the authorities may also consider locating certain activities identified in the Grand Harbour Revival Plan outside the Grand Harbour area, particularly where this could reduce congestion and preserve critical maritime capacity.

8. Complementarity to Wider Strategies

The Forum stresses the importance for this Grand Harbour Revival Plan to align fully with other related existing and proposed strategies applicable both locally and abroad. To this end, the Forum believes that the Grand Harbour Revival Plan must follow the National Maritime Transport Strategy which is expected to be launched imminently by the Ministry for Transport, Infrastructure and Public Works. Throughout its 4 Pillars, this strategy, to which the Forum contributed actively is intimately related to the functionality and infrastructure of the Grand Harbour to ascertain the economy's connectivity requirements and the resource needs of the country. The National Maritime Transport Strategy, in fact, envisages Malta as a;

- Logistics Hub
- Services hub providing global clients with wider and higher-value added regulatory and ancillary services
- Space for People in the Maritime Community to work, learn and develop skills, and
- RTDI Maritime Cluster with a digital, AI, robotics and materials orientation

Likewise, both the Grand Harbour Revival Plan and the National Maritime Transport Strategy must complement and support Malta's 2050 Economic Vision unveiled by the Prime Minister on 27th February. The Vision gives due recognition to the maritime industry to which it attributes the role of a prime pillar of Malta's future economic prosperity.

Moreover, almost contemporaneously, the European Commission launched its EU Ports Strategy. Once again, the Forum believes that Malta's Grand Harbour Revival Plan must align fully with this comprehensive framework of the EU intended to step up the competitiveness, resilience, security and sustainability of Europe's ports,

9. Conclusion

The Malta Maritime Forum welcomes the revitalising of the Grand Harbour and recognises the potential benefits of a well-designed regeneration strategy. A revived harbour that is better organised, upgraded and aesthetically improved can create significant value for Malta.

However, the Grand Harbour must always remain primarily a fully functional maritime port for the provision of maritime services.

The Forum therefore reiterates that its support for the Grand Harbour Revival Plan is contingent upon several key assurances:

- The completion of independent Nautical Risk Assessments that confirm the safety and feasibility of the proposed developments.
- The preparation of holistic long-term plans that safeguard the harbour's commercial and strategic functions.
- The provision of adequate relocation solutions for existing operators and concessionaires to ensure seamless continuity of operations.
- The preservation of sufficient flexibility to accommodate future maritime developments, larger vessels and evolving energy infrastructure requirements.

Provided these conditions are satisfied, the Forum believes that Malta can achieve a balanced outcome: a Grand Harbour that is revived, reorganised and enhanced, while continuing to serve as one of the country's most strategic economic assets.

Such an approach would ensure that Malta remains not only home to one of the Mediterranean's most beautiful harbours but also to one of its most capable and strategically resilient maritime gateways.