

# **FEEDBACK BY THE MALTA CHAMBER**

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## **A Strategy for Health-Enhancing Physical Activity**

**Presented to :** Ministry for Health and Active Ageing

**Date :** 20/09/2024

## INTRODUCTION

The Malta Chamber hereby presents a range of proposals designed to promote a healthier population and environment, which are essential for encouraging the adoption of Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA). A multifaceted approach that effectively promotes and facilitates physical activity across people with different ages, abilities, and socio-economic conditions is necessary to reap the benefits of HEPA, at both the individual and societal levels.

To encourage HEPA, the Malta Chamber puts forward suggestions which if implemented, can cultivate an environment that:

1. Promotes an active lifestyle by developing a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly infrastructure that guarantees safety and accessibility for everyone.
2. Addresses air quality, particularly with respect to pollution arising from traffic congestion.
3. Educates the population on the benefits of HEPA, focusing on instilling active-lifestyle practices from a young age through the education system.
4. Discourages a sedentary lifestyle by promoting and equipping active workspaces.

The Malta Chamber believes that a comprehensive approach is essential, incorporating legislative measures, enforcement, and educational initiatives. Collaboration among all stakeholders and the provision of adequate facilities are key to meeting these goals. Without this holistic approach, efforts to increase HEPA on a national scale and promote a healthier community will be compromised.

The Malta Chamber's recommendations for improving HEPA engagement address:

1. Awareness
2. Built and Natural Environment
3. Air Pollution
4. The Education System
5. The Workplace

## 6. Accessibility

Further elaboration can be found in the subsequent section.

## FEEDBACK & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Awareness

The Malta Chamber believes that the first step in the right direction is to educate the public and raise awareness about the wide-ranging benefits of physical activity, including the reduced risk of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), lower risk of mobility issues as one ages, improved mental health, as well as enhanced sexual health. The campaign should also touch upon the costs and adverse effects of physical inactivity, such as increased risk of obesity, morbidity, and mortality.

To effectively reach diverse demographics, the campaign's messaging and delivery should be tailored to each target group. Below are a few examples:

| Demographic Group             | Media Used   |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>Children</b>               | a) Activity sessions in schools, including a: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Talk and discussion' component which explains the benefits of HEPA.</li> <li>• 'Hands-on physical activity' component where children are exposed to different ways in which they can engage in HEPA.</li> </ul> b) Cartoon advertisements, potentially centred around a mascot, shown on television as well as on platforms popular with children such as YouTube.<br>N.B. The mascot used in the cartoons should also be implemented in any material used to promote the campaign, such as the slides used during school talks, any printed material like books, leaflets, etc. |
| <b>Teenagers/Young Adults</b> | a) Social media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborations with influencers (including athletes and non-athletes) and platforms with teenage/young-adult audiences</li> <li>• Instagram Reels and TikTok videos promoting benefits of HEPA, and more importantly easy ways in which HEPA can be carried out on a daily basis.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Adults</b>                 | a) Television and Facebook advertisements.<br>b) Training sessions at the workplace, especially for those who work mostly sedentary jobs, explaining and demonstrating how to be more active at the workplace.   |
| <b>Elderly</b>                | a) Activity sessions in care homes, including a: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Talk and discussion' component which explains the benefits of HEPA.</li> </ul>  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Hands-on physical activity’ component where the elderly are exposed to different ways in which they can engage in HEPA, tailored to their capabilities given mobility problems that arise with old age.</li> </ul> <p>b) Television advertisements, demonstrating simple exercises and habits which can be adopted by the elderly to increase their HEPA levels.</p> |
| <p><b>Residents of Mental Healthcare Facilities, Corrective Facilities, Rehabilitation Centres, and others.</b></p> | <p>a) Activity sessions in, including a:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Talk and discussion’ component which explains the benefits of HEPA.</li> <li>• ‘Hands-on physical activity’ component where the residents are exposed to different ways in which they can engage in HEPA, tailored to the limitations and lack of resources which they may live with.</li> </ul>                        |

The primary focus of the campaign should be to promote the benefits of HEPA while demonstrating practical ways to achieve these targets. This approach ensures that reaching HEPA goals feels accessible and achievable, rather than daunting or out of reach.

## 2. Built and Natural Environment

To effectively promote physical activity, the built and natural environments must be intentionally designed and equipped to actively encourage people to utilize these spaces. This requires ensuring accessibility, safety, and the availability of green and blue spaces that draw people in and inspire them to start being and remain active.

The Malta Chamber recommends:

- i. Expanding Pedestrian Zones: Increase the pedestrianisation of roads and public squares to create more walkable areas, encouraging foot traffic and reducing reliance on vehicles. This initiative should be paired with efforts to boost activity in these pedestrianised zones, such as hosting events, promoting outdoor dining, and creating spaces for leisure, to ensure that local businesses are still allowed to thrive.<sup>1</sup>
- ii. Upgrading Pavements: Ensure that pavements are well-maintained, level, and sufficiently wide to prevent hazards like tripping or accessibility issues. This will make walking safer and more appealing for everyone.
- iii. Enhancing and Extending Bicycle Lanes: Increase the number of bicycle lanes and ensure they are continuous, avoiding abrupt stops that force cyclists into traffic. This

<sup>1</sup> <https://timesofmalta.com/article/lessons-four-years-pedestrianising-village-square-gozo.1096866>

will significantly improve cyclist safety and encourage more people to use bikes as a mode of transportation.

- iv. Strengthening Road Safety Measures: Implement comprehensive road safety enhancements such as speed bumps, speed cameras, and road markings to protect all road users, including pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists.
- v. Maintaining Sports Facilities: Ensure proper upkeep and regular maintenance of sports facilities to keep them in optimal condition, encouraging more people to engage in physical activity.
- vi. Introducing a Bike Rental Service: Launch a bike rental service with conveniently located ‘parking racks’ near key destinations like universities, office complexes, beaches, shopping areas, and supermarkets. This service will provide a practical and eco-friendly transportation option for short commutes.

In previous publications and consultations, the Malta Chamber has also proposed the following recommendations which can be applied to HEPA:

- i. Maintain Public Spaces: Ensure regular upkeep and maintenance of public areas such as parks, playgrounds, and promenades. Well-maintained spaces are more inviting and safe for recreational use, promoting greater community engagement and physical activity.
- ii. Promote Green Infrastructure: Encourage the adoption of green infrastructure and retrofitting solutions to address the urban heat island effect. This can include planting more trees, creating green roofs, and using reflective materials to reduce heat absorption, thus making urban areas cooler and more comfortable.
- iii. Incorporate Physical Activity Facilities at Events: Integrate physical activity options into mass events, which typically focus on food stalls, often offering unhealthy choices. By adding easily set-up activity facilities like basketball hoops, skateboard ramps, trampolines, darts, air hockey, table tennis, and bocce, these events can promote active lifestyles and offer engaging alternatives to sedentary activities.

### **3. Air Pollution**

Air quality plays a critical role in determining how much people engage in physical activity. It is difficult to encourage walking or cycling when individuals are exposed to hazardous levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Therefore, improving air quality is not just important—it is essential for promoting walking and cycling while ensuring that physical activity does not come at the cost of respiratory health. Addressing this issue is a fundamental step toward creating a healthier and more active population. The Malta Chamber has long recognised the need to improve the level of air pollution and continues to push the following recommendations in this regard:



- i. Expand Urban Green Spaces: Increase the number of green spaces and tree planting in urban areas to help absorb CO2 emissions, improve air quality, and create more inviting environments for physical activity.
- ii. Invest in Clean Public Transport: Allocate funding to increase the number of clean, efficient public transport options, such as electric buses, to reduce pollution and encourage wider use of public transportation.
- iii. Launch an E-Mobility Wallet: Introduce an e-mobility wallet to promote shared transportation options, both by sea and land. This digital wallet would streamline payment for various eco-friendly transportation methods, making shared transport more convenient and attractive.
- iv. Implement Urban Parking Fees Linked to Sustainable Transport: Introduce parking fees in central urban areas, with the revenue being transferred into the e-mobility wallet. This incentivizes the use of sustainable transport options by allowing drivers to reinvest parking fees into eco-friendly alternatives such as public transport or shared mobility services.
- v. Enhance Public Transport to Industrial Estates: Improve public transport routes and access to and from industrial estates, ensuring that workers have reliable and efficient options for commuting without relying on private cars.
- vi. Support Businesses Promoting Shared Transport: Incentivize businesses that encourage shared transport or other green alternatives through a combination of tax deductions and vouchers. These incentives would increase as the number of passengers in each carpool grows, while also lowering the thresholds in the Employee Transportation Deduction Act to make carpooling more accessible and rewarding.

#### **4. The Education System**

Promoting an active lifestyle from an early age is crucial for fostering lifelong healthy habits that persist through adolescence and adulthood. By integrating HEPA into the educational system—through both awareness and practical implementation—students from primary school to university are consistently exposed to physical activity and equipped with the resources needed to embrace an active lifestyle. In this context, the Malta Chamber proposes the following initiatives:

- i. Integrate Physical Activity in Child-Care Centres: Incorporate physical activity programs in public child-care centres to introduce children to active lifestyles at a young age. Early exposure to physical activity helps instil healthy habits that can last a lifetime.
- ii. Introduce Active Breaks in Schools: Implement active breaks in the educational system, such as running a lap around the track or taking a dance break. These short,

energizing activities not only promote physical health but also help students stay focused and improve overall well-being.

- iii. Extend School Transportation for After-School Sports: Expand the school transportation system to operate beyond regular school hours, specifically for extracurricular sports activities. This encourages parents to enrol their children in these activities. Additionally, shared transportation reduces the number of cars on the road, contributing to improved air quality, which in turn further encourages physical activity among adults as mentioned in the previous section.

The Malta Chamber has also previously proposed the following recommendations in this regard:

- i. Enhance Physical Education in Schools: Integrate more physical education opportunities within the educational curriculum, ensuring children leave school with fundamental skills such as swimming, cycling, and running. Building on initiatives like FunFit5, The Malta Chamber advocates for mandatory daily physical activity of at least an hour for students from Year 3 onwards in all public colleges, covering a range of disciplines to encourage HEPA.
- ii. Implement Mandatory Sports Credits at the Tertiary Level: Introduce a system where sports credits are mandatory parts of the curriculum at the tertiary level in Malta, following examples from liberal arts programs in universities abroad, such as in the United States. This would build on the sports education provided during compulsory schooling and continue to promote an active lifestyle among young adults.

## 5. The Workplace

The majority of working-age adults spend a large portion of their day at the workplace, and modern work environments are predominantly sedentary, with minimal daily physical activity. Therefore, it is essential to adapt the work environment to promote an active lifestyle. This should encompass not only physical activity practices within the workplace but also the commute to and from work, as well as encouraging the use of free time for HEPA outside of working hours. In light of this, the Malta Chamber recommends the following measures:

- i. Offer Tax Credits to Companies that Equip Workspaces with Showers, Changing Rooms, and Storage for Bicycles/Electric Scooters: Encourage businesses to support active commuting by offering tax credits for equipping workplaces with showers, changing rooms, and secure storage for bicycles and electric scooters. These facilities make it more convenient and appealing for employees to cycle, walk, or use scooters, promoting healthier, more sustainable transportation options. By making active





- commuting easier and more accessible, companies can foster a more physically active workforce while also contributing to reducing traffic congestion and emissions.
- ii. Offer Grants for Investment in Active Workstations: Encourage companies to create healthier work environments by offering grants/subsidies for the installation of active workstations, such as height-adjustable desks, walking pads, or standing desks. These setups allow employees to incorporate light physical activity into their workday, reducing the harmful effects of prolonged sitting while boosting both physical health and productivity.
  - iii. Offer Tax Credits for Corporate Gym Memberships: Introduce tax incentives for companies that provide corporate gym memberships or offer discounts on fitness programs for their employees. This financial support encourages businesses to invest in the health and well-being of their workforce, leading to a healthier, more active team.
  - iv. Promote Active Breaks: Encourage short, active breaks during the workday, such as a quick walk around the office, stretching sessions, or short standing meetings. These breaks not only promote physical health but also help reduce stress, improve concentration, and increase overall employee well-being.
  - v. Encourage Flexible Working Hours: Promote the adoption of flexible working hours, allowing employees to manage their schedules in ways that provide more opportunities for physical activity. By giving employees the freedom to adjust their work hours, they can more easily fit exercise into their routines, whether it's during the morning, midday, or after work.
  - vi. Provide Grants for Workplace Fitness Investments: Establish grants or subsidies for companies that invest in on-site fitness facilities or activities, such as purchasing treadmills, stationary bikes, or offering fitness classes for employees after work. These investments encourage a culture of wellness in the workplace, making it easier for employees to stay active without needing to leave the office.

## 6. Accessibility

Individuals of all ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and abilities should have equal access to opportunities for engaging in HEPA. It is crucial to ensure that everyone, regardless of their circumstances, can utilize facilities and adopt an active lifestyle. In this regard, the Malta Chamber proposes the following recommendations:

- i. Promote Free Outdoor Fitness Classes: Encourage the organization of free outdoor fitness classes in public spaces, such as parks, beaches, and urban squares. These classes can attract a wide range of participants by offering accessible, community-driven opportunities for physical activity. Hosting sessions in open spaces makes



exercise more inclusive and promotes a sense of community involvement in active lifestyles.

- ii. Introduce Family-Friendly Fitness Classes: Promote fitness classes designed for families, allowing individuals of all ages—children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly—to engage in physical activity together. These multi-generational classes foster an inclusive environment where families can bond through exercise, making physical activity enjoyable and accessible for all members, regardless of age or ability.
- iii. Ensure Safety Measures and Adequate Lighting: Implement sufficient safety measures, including proper lighting, in public spaces and sports facilities to encourage physical activity at any time of day. For individuals who prefer or are only able to exercise early in the morning or late at night due to their work or other duties, well-lit and secure environments can make them feel safer and more comfortable engaging in physical activity, removing the barrier of limited time.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Malta Chamber’s comprehensive approach to promoting Health-Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA) is both innovative and essential for fostering a healthier society. By addressing key areas such as awareness, the built and natural environment, air quality, the education system, the workplace, and accessibility, the Chamber’s proposals aim to create a more inclusive, supportive, and motivating environment for physical activity.

The proposed initiatives highlight the importance of integrating physical activity into various aspects of daily life—from the classroom to the workplace, and from public spaces to personal routines. Emphasizing education and awareness will lay the foundation for long-term lifestyle changes, while improvements in infrastructure and safety will make physical activity more appealing and accessible.

Moreover, tackling air pollution and promoting eco-friendly transportation options are critical for ensuring that physical activity remains a safe and viable choice for everyone. By implementing these strategies, the Malta Chamber envisions a future where all individuals, regardless of age, socioeconomic status, or ability, can seamlessly incorporate HEPA into their lives.

The success of these recommendations hinges on collaborative efforts among stakeholders, effective legislative actions, and consistent enforcement. With a united commitment to these goals, Malta can achieve significant strides in enhancing public health and well-being, ultimately fostering a more vibrant and active community.



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