

THE MALTA CHAMBER

GRAND HARBOUR REVIVAL PLAN

Presented to: Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation

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Introduction

The Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry (The Malta Chamber) has, for the past years, highlighted the importance of giving due attention to the regeneration of the Grand Harbour area and its immediate surroundings and localities to ensure that its historic prestige, its architectural beauty, and its strategic value both for the hospitality and maritime industry (including ancillary services) are catered for.

In order to provide comprehensive feedback from all industry stakeholders, The Malta Chamber set up a Grand Harbour Revival Working Group to gather structured industry feedback on the proposed regeneration plan.

The Malta Chamber is of the opinion that the Grand Harbour Revival Plan must, from the outset, take into consideration all elements which are currently operating from within the Grand Harbour and those which are servicing them or using their services, coupled with the potential of the area. **Clarity is needed on how each element will be accommodated, sequenced and future-proofed within the revival/regeneration framework. The current proposal appears conceptual and architecturally driven, with extremely limited information on the technical, operational, and environmental impacts. It is also not known whether any economic impact studies have been carried out, and if yes what was their outcome.**

The million-dollar challenge is: The Grand Harbour is a thriving maritime hub. How are we going to balance the high-end tourism depicted in the Grand Harbour Revival Plan with industry and other maritime services synonymous with the area?

The Grand Harbour currently accommodates a vibrant mix of tourism and yachting activity, including marinas and berths for luxury and leisure yachts, cruise ship terminals serving a wide range of passenger itineraries, waterfront promenades, cultural and heritage attractions, curated dining experiences, and retail outlets designed to enhance the visitor experience. The harbour also supports yacht charter services, mooring facilities, refuelling, maintenance, and ancillary maritime services catering to high-value tourism clientele. It is also Malta's primary commercial maritime gateway and one of the most strategically significant pieces of national infrastructure. Beyond its historic and cultural value, it underpins Malta's economic model as an open, trade-dependent island state. The harbour serves as a critical gateway for the importation of essential goods and key supplies necessary to sustain economic activity and daily life. It supports ro-ro and ro-pax freight, cruise liners, bunkering



operations, ship repair activity, fishing fleets, maritime services and a broad ecosystem of ancillary operators. For an island state such as Malta, maritime access is a lifeline. Any long-term vision for the harbour must strengthen this foundational role. **To date, no detailed maritime impact assessment, berth utilisation study, cargo displacement plan, traffic modelling exercise, or integrated port masterplan has been made publicly available. The absence of documentation and of a clearly defined commercial port development strategy restricts meaningful stakeholder engagement and creates uncertainty regarding the long-term implications for Malta’s trade resilience and maritime competitiveness.**

During the launch of The Grand Harbour Revival Plan, launched by the Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation (GHRC) in February the GHRC Chief Executive Officer confirmed that the intention is not displacement but partnership: “We want to find solutions where to relocate so that you will continue with your activity¹.” This commitment must be codified in binding policy from the outset.

¹ <https://thebusinesspicture.com/2026/03/04/future-proofing-the-grand-harbour/>

Key Concerns

1. Luxury and/versus Quality Experiences

Luxury destinations are not defined by a single landmark hotel or a well-designed marina. They are defined, amongst other things, by the consistency and completeness of the experience they deliver. High-net-worth visitors — one of the profiles that Malta is actively seeking to attract — have a very specific set of expectations: seamless arrival and departure, privacy, exclusivity, impeccable public realm, curated retail and dining, frictionless mobility between sites, and an absence of the visual and operational disorder that characterises lower-tier destinations. These visitors have choices. They will benchmark Malta not against its own past but against Portofino, Monaco, Dubrovnik and the Balearics just to mention a few. Any gap between the luxury label and the reality on the ground will not go unnoticed — and in an era of immediate online visibility, it will not go unreported. The Grand Harbour Revival Plan must therefore define luxury not as an aspiration but as a measurable standard, with specifications, governance and enforcement mechanisms that ensure delivery across every element of the destination — not just within the boundaries of individual concessions.

2. Absence of Published Technical and Economic Evidence

A central concern raised during discussions was the **lack of publicly available supporting documentation**. Stakeholders questioned what technical assessments informed the proposed reallocation of quays, how berth capacity calculations were conducted, and whether vessel growth projections were incorporated into planning assumptions.

International best practice in port-city regeneration observed in major Mediterranean ports typically involves a phased master planning process underpinned by:

- Berth occupancy and capacity modelling under multiple vessel growth scenarios
- Forecasting of vessel size and frequency trends
- Cargo throughput and trailer volume projections
- Heavy vehicle traffic modelling and urban congestion analysis
- Environmental and navigational risk assessments
- Cost-benefit economic analyses evaluating national trade resilience implications

In the case of the Grand Harbour Revival Plan, concept visuals have been presented before a strategy has been formally articulated. Without transparent data, it is impossible to determine whether operational capacity will be maintained, expanded or reduced.



Given **Malta's insularity and complete reliance on maritime supply chains**, any planning decision that potentially affects berth length, turning basins or cargo hinterland must be **evidence-based** and **subject to rigorous scrutiny**. For a port serving a fully import-dependent island economy, transparency is not procedural — it is foundational to responsible policy formation.

Significantly, Malta is actively engaging with the European Union to push for formal impact assessments on the implications of maritime policy for island states. It would be inconsistent, to say the least, for Malta to champion that standard in Brussels while proceeding with a transformation of its principal maritime gateway without applying the same rigour domestically. The Grand Harbour Revival Plan must therefore be underpinned by the same quality of evidence-based assessment that Malta is calling for at European level.

3. Operational Displacement and Berthing Pressure

Although Phase 1 may not directly eliminate major cargo quays, the coastline currently accommodates a complex network of operational users. These include barges, bunkering logistics, repair support activity, fishing vessels, equipment storage, pollution response infrastructure and ancillary maritime services. **No structured relocation plan has been published for these operators.**

The Working Group highlighted that displacement without identified alternatives will inevitably result in operational spillover into primary cargo-handling zones. This creates compounded congestion risks and increased safety hazards. Even under present conditions, operational pressure is significant:

- Battery Wharf faces simultaneous berthing constraints that restrict scheduling flexibility.
- Trailer parking capacity is insufficient, forcing operators to stage vehicles along public roads.
- Operators must shuttle trailers between vessels due to limited quay space, increasing turnaround times and cost inefficiencies.

For ro-ro operations, time sensitivity is critical. Delays in vessel discharge directly impact downstream supply chains. Unlike continental ports, Malta does not have alternative inland logistics corridors to absorb inefficiencies. **Increased turnaround times translate directly into higher freight costs and inflationary pressure on imported goods.**

Directly opposite the Phase 1 regeneration site at Laboratory Wharf and Magazine Wharf, conventional cargo operations remain highly active and continue to handle a range of commodities essential to Malta's industry and domestic consumption — including bulk and break-bulk cargoes such as aggregates, steel products, grain, scrap metal and cement. By their nature, such operations require heavy vehicle movements, lifting operations, cargo handling equipment and open storage areas.



These are inherent and unavoidable characteristics of a functioning commercial port environment. Any regeneration initiative must recognise and accommodate these operational realities.

The Malta Chamber is concerned that the cumulative effect of incremental berth reduction, loss of hinterland, and increased congestion may not be immediately visible but will progressively erode competitiveness. The port ecosystem extends well beyond the quays: effective port operations require a functional hinterland including logistics facilities, maritime services and shipping offices historically located in areas such as Marsa. It is important to note that national policy under the Structure Plan for the Maltese Islands (1990) and the Grand Harbour Local Plan (2002) had designated these areas for industrial and maritime-support uses and significant investment have been made in this regard by businesses since then.

4. Vessel Size Growth and Infrastructure Requirements

Malta's national tourism strategy and long-term planning frameworks signal a decisive pivot toward **high-end, niche cruise tourism**. This involves prioritizing smaller luxury vessels—typically carrying approximately 200 passengers—over the mass-market mega-ships that currently characterize the harbour's traffic. The Malta Chamber fully supports this transition, as it aligns with the broader objective of attracting higher-value tourism segments and enhancing the quality of the visitor experience.

The transition to a boutique cruise model necessitates a specialized approach to infrastructure and urban planning. Smaller luxury vessels operate under different requirements than their mass-market counterparts:

- **Bespoke Passenger Flows:** Luxury travellers expect a seamless arrival experience, characterized by high-quality waterfront public spaces and efficient, private transfer services.
- **Integrated Terminal Design:** The **Grand Harbour Revival Plan** must explicitly detail how terminal design and the surrounding public realm will be calibrated for this profile.
- **Quality of Environment:** Existing facilities designed for high-volume throughput may not meet the expectations of the luxury segment. The design of cruise infrastructure must reflect this strategic repositioning, creating an environment that complements a premium visitor experience immediately upon disembarkation.

In contrast to the tourism-led cruise sector, Ro-Pax vessels are vital "working vessels" essential to Malta's supply chain and connectivity with mainland Europe. To maintain the island's logistical



integrity, planning must account for the significant increase in vessel size and capacity observed over the last decade. Essential requirements for these vessels include:

- **Technical Specifications:** Increased berth lengths, deeper drafts, and enhanced quay load-bearing capacities to accommodate larger ramps and heavy trailer traffic.
- **Operational Safeguards:** Sufficient turning basins and dedicated circulation space for trailers must be protected from encroachment by leisure or hospitality developments.

Mediterranean vessel trends indicate continued growth in ship dimensions. Given that the Grand Harbour's physical geometry is fixed, planning decisions must be "future-proofed" for a 20- to 30-year horizon.

The Malta Chamber emphasizes that any introduction of floating pontoons or fixed marina structures within constrained navigational corridors must be subject to rigorous maritime safety assessments. Large vessel propulsion systems generate significant wash and thrust, which can destabilize smaller craft and damage light infrastructure.

While The Malta Chamber is not opposed to marina development, such projects should not interfere with the operational integrity of commercial shipping lanes. Planning must prioritize the manoeuvring space required for next-generation vessels to ensure the harbour remains a viable commercial and logistical hub.

5. Industrial–Tourism Coexistence Risks

The proposed integration of hotels, residential development, retail zones and marina infrastructure within close proximity to heavy maritime operations raises legitimate questions about **long-term coexistence**. Specific points of tension include:

- Bunkering operations involve fuel transfer procedures subject to strict safety protocols that are incompatible with adjacent public or leisure activity.
- Ro-ro discharge generates heavy vehicle movement, noise and emissions, particularly at peak throughput times.
- Cruise vessels operate on fixed schedules with high passenger throughput, creating periodic surges in pedestrian and vehicle traffic.
- Ship repair activities involve industrial equipment and night-time work schedules that will conflict with residential amenity expectations.



While modern residential and hospitality developments can incorporate soundproofing technologies to mitigate noise from port operations, such mitigation measures are largely limited to enclosed indoor environments. Public realm areas — including waterfront promenades, outdoor dining spaces, marinas and recreational walkways — remain directly exposed to the operational realities of a working port. Activities such as cargo handling, vessel manoeuvring, heavy vehicle movement and ship repair operations generate noise, emissions and operational lighting that cannot be fully mitigated in open environments. This distinction is important when assessing long-term compatibility between industrial maritime activity and leisure-oriented waterfront development.

Experience in other port cities demonstrates that residential and tourism encroachment often leads, over time, to operational restrictions imposed on ports due to complaints regarding noise, traffic or emissions. The risk is not immediate incompatibility but gradual functional displacement. Port activity is regulated under the Ports and Shipping Act (Chapter 499) and the Port Regulations (S.L. 499.01): these legal instruments must be respected and reinforced, not gradually eroded through incompatible adjacent land uses.

Given the narrow physical separation between quays in the Grand Harbour, coexistence must be carefully zoned and sequenced. Once port-supporting land is converted to other uses, it is rarely possible to recover it for maritime purposes. This is not a theoretical risk: across European port cities, there are documented cases of maritime activity being progressively squeezed from harbour zones as residential and leisure development expanded, leaving those ports with constrained operational capacity and insufficient land for growth. It is important to have a well-managed operational boundary - an unmanaged operational boundary will serve neither the tourism proposition nor the maritime sector. Luxury destinations are defined by the consistency of the experience they offer. This includes seamless mobility between sites — whether through scheduled water taxi services connecting the harbour's key nodes, continuous waterfront walkways, or any other alternative connections that may be considered. These are not peripheral considerations; they are part of what visitors to world-class waterfront destinations expect and what Malta must plan for deliberately.

6. Strategic Resilience and National Security

Malta's geographic reality necessitates a resilience-first approach. The Grand Harbour is one of only two major maritime gateways on the island. Outside the Freeport at Marsaxlokk, it is the only harbour capable of supporting diversified commercial maritime operations, including ro-ro freight critical for vehicle and trailer transport.



In emergency scenarios — whether supply chain disruption, geopolitical instability, fuel shortages or extreme weather events — maritime access is Malta’s sole lifeline. Strategic redundancy cannot be jeopardised. Once quay infrastructure is repurposed or physically altered, reinstatement is technically and financially complex.

At European level, the Draghi Report on European Competitiveness (September 2024) explicitly identified strategic autonomy as a defining challenge, observing that dependencies on trade routes are increasingly becoming vulnerabilities requiring countermeasures. The EU’s Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) Regulation and Military Mobility initiative both recognise ports as critical nodes for the movement of equipment, supplies and personnel. A joint study by the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp-Bruges published in early 2025 described those ports as forming a logistical and industrial complex of unique strategic value for Europe’s energy transition, industrial competitiveness and security of supply — and both operate under national policy frameworks that explicitly protect port hinterlands from incompatible development. Malta should apply precisely the same logic.

The Malta Chamber therefore emphasises that the Grand Harbour must be classified and treated as **critical national infrastructure** within all planning and development decisions affecting it.

7. Need for Forward-Looking Maritime Innovation

A recurring theme during discussions was that if substantial public and private investment is to be mobilised under the Grand Harbour Revival Plan, it should also be directed towards strengthening **Malta’s maritime competitiveness**. Regeneration of the waterfront presents a rare generational opportunity not only to improve the urban environment, but to **modernise** the harbour’s operational backbone in line with **international best practice**.

Across Europe and beyond, leading ports are responding to spatial constraints, climate obligations and supply chain volatility not by reducing operational capacity, but by investing in smart, green and digitally integrated infrastructure. For example, the Port of Rotterdam has implemented Portbase, a fully integrated digital Port Community System that connects shipping lines, terminals, customs and logistics providers in real time, significantly reducing administrative friction and vessel turnaround times. Similarly, the Port of Antwerp-Bruges has developed advanced data-sharing platforms to enhance cargo visibility and operational coordination.

Urban ports facing land scarcity have adopted structured and multi-level storage solutions to optimise limited hinterland. Terminals within the Port of Barcelona and the Port of Genoa have explored spatial



optimisation strategies that increase throughput without expanding footprint. In Malta's context, where trailer staging and hinterland constraints are already evident structured trailer storage and smart yard management systems could significantly enhance efficiency.

On the environmental front, ports such as the Port of Oslo and Rotterdam have deployed shore-to-ship power systems (cold ironing), allowing vessels to switch off auxiliary engines while berthed. In Oslo's case, this effort extends well beyond cruise ships — since 2018 the port has invested NOK 225 million in shore-power infrastructure covering cruise vessels, ferries, bulk carriers and container ships, with a new cruise facility and shore power for tankers still in the pipeline. These measures reduce emissions and noise in urban environments and enable coexistence between port activity and surrounding communities. Meanwhile, the Port of Valencia is advancing electrification of port equipment and renewable integration as part of its decarbonisation pathway.

In parallel, global bunkering hubs such as the Port of Singapore are investing heavily in alternative fuel infrastructure, positioning themselves at the forefront of LNG, methanol and emerging green fuel supply chains. Given Malta's longstanding strength in maritime services and bunkering, there is a strategic opportunity to leverage the Grand Harbour as a platform for next-generation green bunkering aligned with EU climate objectives and Fit-for-55 commitments.

Investment in such solutions would simultaneously:

- Improve environmental performance and reduce urban externalities;
- Increase operational efficiency and berth productivity;
- Optimise scarce land resources;
- Enhance resilience through digital coordination and predictive traffic management;
- Strengthen Malta's attractiveness as a competitive maritime hub within the Mediterranean.

Importantly, Malta has repeatedly articulated its **ambition to position itself as a leading maritime services hub** — encompassing ship management, bunkering, marine insurance, legal services, yacht registration and ancillary support services. Achieving this ambition requires infrastructure that signals technological sophistication, operational reliability and environmental alignment. A regeneration strategy that prioritises logistics modernisation alongside urban enhancement would reinforce this positioning.

At present, however, the Revival Plan does not articulate a clear innovation roadmap for strengthening maritime operations. The Malta Chamber therefore believes that a defined portion of regeneration



funding whether public, private or through blended financing mechanisms, should be channelled into modernising the harbour's logistics systems, digital integration and green infrastructure.

Regeneration should not simply reshape the waterfront visually; it should future-proof Malta's maritime ecosystem.

8. Governance and Institutional Coordination

The scale, complexity and long-term implications of the Grand Harbour Revival Plan necessitate a whole-of-government approach. The harbour operates at the intersection of multiple policy domains — maritime transport, land-use planning, environmental regulation, infrastructure development, economic competitiveness, tourism and national resilience. Its future configuration requires integrated strategic alignment across all relevant portfolios.

In projects of this magnitude, international best practice involves adoption of an overarching port masterplan that clearly articulates:

- Long-term maritime capacity objectives and phased infrastructure sequencing;
- Land-use compatibility parameters and governance structures;
- Environmental mitigation frameworks;
- Investment prioritisation aligned with national resilience and competitiveness objectives.

Such a framework provides clarity to investors, operators and communities while ensuring that policy objectives across ministries remain mutually reinforcing. The Malta Chamber believes that the Grand Harbour Revival Plan would benefit from being situated within a formally articulated integrated port strategy, supported by structured inter-agency coordination involving the Ministry for the Environment, the Ministry for Transport, the Ministry for the Economy, the GHRC, Transport Malta, Infrastructure Malta, the Planning Authority and the Environment and Resources Authority. A joint steering committee or inter-agency task force reporting to Cabinet could provide oversight and ensure that regeneration ambitions, transport policy, climate commitments, maritime competitiveness objectives and national resilience considerations remain aligned.

Recommendations

1. Commission and Publish a Comprehensive Maritime Impact Assessment

Before the Plan advances into binding spatial or concession commitments, Government should commission and publish an independent, technically robust **Maritime Impact Assessment**. Given the Grand Harbour's systemic importance to Malta's economy, this assessment must extend beyond a conventional environmental study. It should incorporate:

- Berth occupancy and capacity modelling under multiple vessel growth scenarios (including cruise, ro-ro, ro-Pax and ancillary traffic);
- Long-term projections of trailer and cargo throughput;
- Cargo displacement mapping identifying affected operators and spatial reallocation requirements;
- Heavy vehicle traffic modelling and urban congestion impact analysis;
- Navigational safety simulations assessing manoeuvrability, wash effects and marina interaction risks;
- Environmental and emissions modelling under current and proposed layouts;
- A comprehensive cost-benefit economic analysis evaluating national trade resilience implications.

Such an assessment should be **publicly accessible** and subject to **structured consultation**.

For a port serving a fully import-dependent island economy, transparency is not procedural — it is foundational to responsible policy formation.

2. Guarantee No Net Loss of Commercial Capacity

The Malta Chamber calls for a formal policy commitment that the Grand Harbour Revival Plan will result in **no net loss of core commercial maritime capacity**. This commitment should explicitly safeguard:

- Ro-ro ramp availability and throughput capability;
- Total commercial quay length;
- Turning basin geometry and manoeuvrability;
- Operational hinterland for cargo handling, equipment storage and logistics support;
- Access corridors for heavy vehicles.

Importantly, capacity should be assessed not only in linear metres of quay, but in effective operational throughput. Reconfigured infrastructure must deliver equal or greater functional capacity.



Where quay realignment or repurposing is proposed, replacement infrastructure must be completed and operational before displacement occurs. Sequencing is critical. Temporary reductions in capacity are not neutral in an island economy — they carry measurable economic cost.

3. Develop a Phased Relocation and Operational Continuity Strategy

Any regeneration that affects existing maritime operators must be accompanied by a structured relocation and continuity framework. This should include:

- A detailed inventory of all affected operators and ancillary services;
- Identification of alternative berths and operational sites prior to relocation;
- Infrastructure readiness assessments confirming equivalent or enhanced operational conditions;
- Clear transitional timelines agreed in consultation with industry;
- Financial or logistical support mechanisms where necessary to avoid operational disruption.

The Malta Chamber stresses that **port ecosystems are interdependent**. Displacing smaller ancillary activities without structured alternatives risks unintended congestion in primary cargo zones.

Operational continuity must be treated as a non-negotiable condition of regeneration.

4. Adopt a Logistics-First Development Sequence

The Malta Chamber strongly recommends that infrastructure reinforcement and logistics optimisation precede large-scale real estate conversion. A prudent sequencing framework would:

- Upgrade and future-proof maritime infrastructure;
- Implement digital and environmental innovation measures;
- Secure cargo and Ro-Ro resilience;
- Integrate complementary public realm and tourism functions.

Public access and waterfront quality improvements are legitimate objectives. However, they should be layered onto a secure and modernised maritime base, not substituted for it.

Ports that have successfully integrated urban regeneration — including the Port of Rotterdam and Port of Barcelona — did so through phased master planning that preserved core logistics capacity.

Malta should adopt a similarly disciplined approach.

5. Prioritise Maritime Innovation Investment

Regeneration funding should not be confined to spatial reallocation or real estate development. A defined portion should be earmarked for strengthening the harbour's operational competitiveness.

Priority areas should include:

- Structured multi-level trailer and equipment storage to address land scarcity;
- Smart port digital systems and port community integration;
- Appointment-based gate automation to reduce congestion;
- Shore-to-ship power installations aligned with EU decarbonisation targets;
- Electrification of port equipment and green bunkering readiness;
- Enhanced navigational safety and traffic management systems.

This approach would reposition the Revival Plan as a competitiveness strategy, enhancing Malta's ambition to function as a leading maritime services hub in the Mediterranean.

If Malta seeks to consolidate its role in ship management, bunkering, yacht services and maritime legal and financial services, the physical infrastructure must reflect that ambition.

Modernisation strengthens both economic and environmental outcomes.

6. Establish a Structured Governance and Coordination Framework

Given the strategic and cross-sectoral implications of the Plan, The Malta Chamber recommends the establishment of a formal governance structure to oversee its implementation.

Such a framework should:

- Align transport, maritime, planning, infrastructure, environmental and economic development portfolios;
- Provide strategic continuity across electoral cycles;
- Ensure sequencing discipline;
- Facilitate structured engagement with industry stakeholders.

In parallel, consultation processes should be supported by comprehensive technical documentation to enable meaningful, data-driven feedback.

A coordinated governance model will not only strengthen policy coherence but enhance investor confidence and long-term credibility.

Conclusion

The Malta Chamber recognises the importance of revitalising underutilised areas within the Grand Harbour and supports initiatives that enhance public access, restore heritage assets and improve the urban interface between the harbour and surrounding communities. Regeneration, when carefully conceived, can add value to both the city and the maritime sector.

However, the Grand Harbour is not simply waterfront real estate — it is strategic national infrastructure. Its commercial functionality underpins Malta’s trade flows, price stability, employment ecosystem and economic resilience. As an island state with no land-based alternatives, Malta’s maritime gateways are its lifelines and therefore decisions affecting berth capacity, manoeuvrability, hinterland space and logistics efficiency must be treated with the a highest degree of gravity — they are as critical as energy and water infrastructure on land.

Strategic sequencing and evidence-based planning are key for the success or otherwise of this project. Regeneration must be anchored in a comprehensive maritime impact assessment, safeguarded commercial capacity, structured operational continuity, and forward-looking investment in innovation. Urban enhancement and maritime functionality are not mutually exclusive — but coexistence requires discipline, technical validation and long-term vision.

Furthermore, Malta has clearly articulated its ambition to strengthen its position as a maritime services hub within the Mediterranean. Achieving this objective requires infrastructure that signals operational reliability, digital sophistication and environmental alignment. A regeneration strategy that modernises and future-proofs the harbour will reinforce that ambition; one that incrementally constrains core capacity risks weakening it.



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