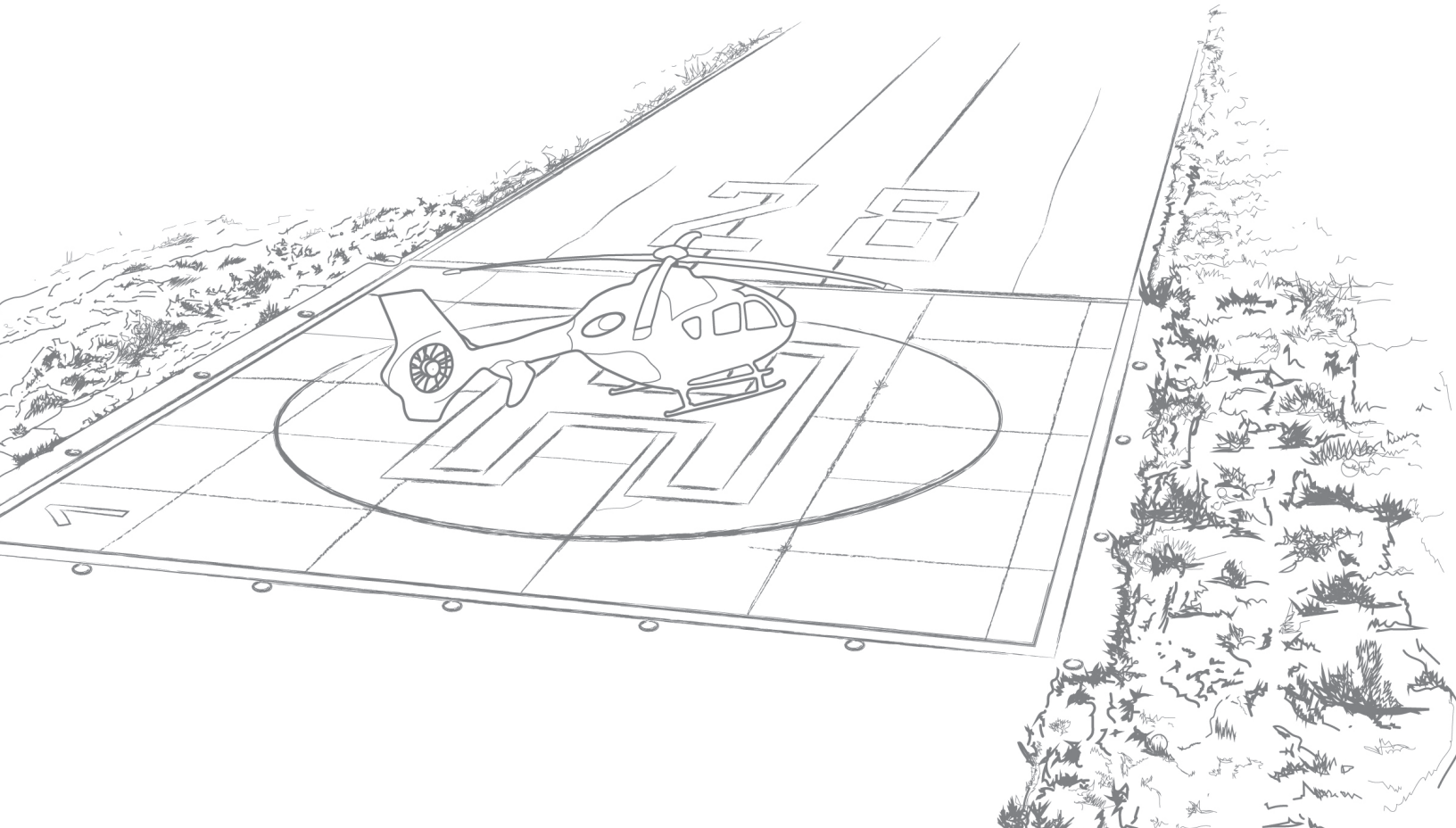




GOZO REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Gozo Rural Airfield

Outcome Statement



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Gozo Rural Airfield

Outcome Statement

Introduction

The Outcome Statement report is being prepared by the Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) following the completion of the Regional Impact Assessment Study (RIAS) on the proposed development of the Gozo Rural Airfield. The RIAS focused on potential economic, social, and environmental impacts of the proposed infrastructural upgrading of the existing airfield. The airfield operations and procedures were beyond the scope of the RIAS. The purpose of the RIAS was not just to identify the negative impacts and mitigate them, but also to engage with the community and maximise the benefits of the proposed project.

The Outcome Statement report outlines the conclusions drawn from the RIAS, highlighting the impacts of the proposed project on Gozo. This report presents GRDA's position on the proposed Gozo Rural Airfield and outlines the recommendations of the RIAS that shall be taken on board.

Background

The Gozo Heliport has been in disuse since 2008, until in 2017 it was decided that it should be used as an Air Ambulance base. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to recall that the first Inter-Island helicopter air service took off in 1987. In fact, between 1990 and 2008, five different helicopter companies tried to operate the Inter-Island air service with all of them eventually running out of business.

The current infrastructure of the Heliport Terminal administered by the Gozo Heliport Ltd under the remit of the Ministry for Gozo was last upgraded and inaugurated in May 1996 following an investment by the Civil Aviation Directorate (CAD) and the Malta International Airport (MIA).

The area bordering the existing Heliport was cleared by members of the Armed Forces of Malta Plant Troop between 2013 and 2014 in preparation for a 900-metre grass runway. The 40,000 m² site was covered in rubble and waste from the construction industry as well as carcasses. This project was later shelved and today the site is in a derelict state.

Since 2015 to date, the Civil Aviation Directorate within Transport Malta (TM) has been conducting studies regarding the possibility of re-activating an inter-island helicopter air service. These studies continue to confirm that the cost to re-activate the Inter-Island helicopter air service is greater than a Short Take-Off and Landing (STOL) airfield for fixed-wing aircraft. Furthermore, previous plans to transform the Gozo Heliport in an airport, were large in scale and were meant for bigger aircraft. Moreover, these plans also encroached onto privately-owned agricultural land. The upgrades that are now being proposed by the Ministry for Gozo (the proponent) will be made on Government-owned land, predominately within the airfield-designated territory.

Overview of Proposed Intervention

The proposed project entails the regeneration and upgrade of the derelict heliport at Ta' Lambert in Xewkija into an airfield for use by small propeller-driven aeroplanes (fixed wing), small helicopters (rotary-wing), drones (eVTOL, Hybrid and electric unmanned aircraft), as well as for other ancillary activities.

The proposed development covers an area of around 76,000 m² which incorporates the runway, four aprons, plus other airside facilities which already exist. The project envisages the extension of the existing 174-metre-long runway by a further 271 metres, to reach a total length of 445 metres. The runway will be 20 metres wide and will include 30-metre-wide grass safety areas on each side.

Such regeneration and upgrade in infrastructure will make it possible to establish an Inter-Island airlink as well as a link with other similar airfields in the immediate region, served by single and/or twin-engine fixed-wing aircraft. The proposed runway length of 445 metres enables the operation of Short Take-Off & Landing (STOL) aircraft. STOL aircraft, that may accommodate from 9 to 19 passengers, depending on the aircraft type, would be ideal for the Inter-Island air transport service. The runway dimensions preclude the operation of medium and large sized aircraft.

Apart from the Inter-Island air transport service, which will improve connectivity between Gozo and Malta, the airfield will be designed to facilitate the development of a General Aviation ecosystem in Gozo, capitalising upon the natural advantages of the Island. Potential General Aviation operators include flight schools which would require a dedicated area for training purposes, light and microlight aircraft for private and tourism purposes, drone operations and other ancillary activities.

Reference can be made to the Regional Impact Assessment report for a more detailed

description of the project, its physical characteristics, and its main objectives. Also, the Project Description Statement presents a detailed explanation of the construction work and earthworks involved, as well as detailed drawings and section drawings.

Regional Impact Assessment Process

The RIAS, mandated by Article 8 of the GRDA Act, entails a process whereby any proposed intervention submitted to Cabinet is considered, assessed, adjusted, and monitored through a Regional Impact Assessment (RIA) system that: (i) measures the proposal's impacts; (ii) consults with the relevant stakeholders and communities; and (iii) follows-up by monitoring the implementation of the intervention. The RIA process and its objectives are highlighted in the RIAS non-technical guide, available on GRDA's website.

The Gozo Rural Airfield RIA process was initiated by the Ministry for Gozo by informing the GRDA of the proposed intervention and providing an initial description of the project. The Authority reviewed the proposal and determined that it falls within the scope of the GRDA Act. Then, through an in-depth screening process, it was concluded that the intervention merits the application of the RIAS.

The next stage of the RIA process was triggered. This stage focused on assessment of the impacts of the proposed intervention on Gozo and their significance, through analysis of existing studies and commissioning of additional studies. The combination of these studies covered three primary fields: economic, social, and environmental. All the identified potential adverse and beneficial impacts of the proposed airfield were analysed in detail to measure their significance across economic, social, and environmental areas. Once all possible impacts were identified, the most significant ones were assessed in-depth.

The results of the impact analysis carried out by the Authority were summarised and presented in a Regional Impact Statement Report, which was published on the GRDA's website. The publication of the Impact Statement, and other supporting studies, was followed by an extensive public consultation with community members and identified stakeholders, and subsequently the preparation of an Impact Assessment Report, which incorporated the information gathered through the consultation process. The purpose of the public consultation and the RIAS was not just to identify the negative impacts and mitigate them, but also to engage with the community and maximise the benefits of the project.

Reference can be made to the Regional Impact Assessment Report for a more detailed description of the RIA process as well as a detailed description of the public consultation methodology, including a list of stakeholders who provided their feedback on the proposed airfield project.

Outcome of the RIAS

Three primary factors were taken in consideration when assessing potential impacts of the proposed intervention on the region of Gozo and its community. These are the economic, social, and environmental impacts. Through an in-depth impact analysis, followed by an extensive public consultation the impacts presented below were identified to be significant.

The economic review, based on research analysis and specially commissioned studies, indicates that the proposed airfield would result into net benefits for the Gozitan community and the national economy. Since a direct airlink can further highlight Gozo as a distinct destination, the proposed intervention envisages an enhancement in Gozo's potential to attract quality tourism. Apart from its contribution to the island's tourism sector, the proposed development will act as an enabler to the creation of new economic activities and jobs, resulting mainly from the introduction of General Aviation (GA) activities. The proposed Gozo Rural Airfield has the potential to attract flight schools, microlight aviation and chartered flights, light cargo transport, drone research and testing, and other aviation activities.

The development of GA and ancillary activities in Gozo is estimated to generate an annual average direct value added of €895,777. This would rise to over €1.7 million worth of value added when considering indirect effects, reaching €2.5 million when including also induced multiplier effects. Moreover, an annual average of 20 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs are estimated to be created in the economy as a direct effect of these activities, increasing to 34 FTE jobs when considering indirect effects and rising to 48 FTE jobs when including also induced multiplier effects.

The Regional Impact Assessment (RIA) included noise pollution, and impacts on landscape and air quality, as social impacts. This is due to the fact that besides being environmental in nature these impacts also have social dimension since people depend on the environment and are affected by changes in it. Apart from some incremental noise level, no other factors were identified to have a material negative social impact on the community.

Potential beneficial social impacts, that were identified following engagement with the community as part of the wider RIA, include improved accessibility, saved travelling time, and enhanced employment, academic and training opportunities in Gozo. These social benefits are highlighted in Section 7.2 of the Regional Impact Assessment Report and explained in more detail.

With regards to the environment, the main impacts that were identified to be significant include impacts on noise quality, impacts on air quality, and impacts on landscape and visual amenity. For each of these identified impacts, mitigation measures have been proposed to minimise the effect of these impacts on the environment and the community. The initial mitigation measures that were proposed for these environmental impacts were well received by the majority of stakeholders, and further recommendations and mitigation measures emanated from the RIA study, following the public consultation. Other impacts which were

identified through the RIAS but were less of a concern to the majority of stakeholders and expected to have a less material impact on the community include impacts on traffic flow and road accessibility, impacts from waste, light pollution and impacts on avifauna. These potential environmental impacts are explained thoroughly in Section 7.3 of the Regional Impact Assessment Report.

The GRDA took into account the stakeholders' views in determining the effects that are likely to be caused by the proposed intervention, and the significance and severity of the impacts highlighted above. This can be confirmed by GRDA's thorough analysis of stakeholder feedback. The GRDA carefully considered all the feedback, verified new information obtained during the consultation process, and incorporated this feedback in the Impact Assessment.

The consultation feedback and stakeholders' views have been organised into common feedback themes. These are presented in detail in Chapter 6 of the Regional Impact Assessment Report, and were reflected in the impacts highlighted above, which are explained in more detail in Chapter 7 of the Regional Impact Assessment Report.

In summary, the feedback received was mainly focused on the airfield design and infrastructure, in particular the runway length, fuel availability, aprons, hangars, the terminal building, and additional airfield facilities such as security and check-in facilities. Other key feedback themes focused on potential environmental impacts, including concerns on air and noise pollution, traffic and road accessibility, and adverse impacts on landscape.

Other points drawn from the public consultation were related to the feasibility of the Inter-Island air transport service, and airfield operations and procedures. Due to the extensive input and recommendations on the subject of airfield operations and procedures, this feedback was considered and incorporated in the Regional Impact Assessment Report, even though this subject was beyond the initial scope of the RIAS.

Recommendations & Mitigation Measures

The several recommendations and mitigations measures that resulted from the RIA study, were thoroughly assessed. Taking the stakeholders' views and feedback into consideration, the GRDA proposes that the following recommendations and mitigation measures be duly considered by the proponent of the project.

The rural aspect of the airfield, the very pleasant landscaping, and the fact that the proposed airfield does not encroach on agricultural land were well received by the vast majority of stakeholders who offered their feedback. However, some stakeholders expressed concern that the airfield regeneration would be done at the expense of undeveloped land and would have an adverse impact on landscape and visual amenity. In this regard, to minimise the impact on landscape and visual amenity, the GRDA recommends that the proposed rural character of the airfield be retained and enhanced, by introducing high quality permeable reinforced grass

paving systems to all aprons, introduce landscaping to the site boundaries, and introduce terraced perimetral retaining boundary walls. The GRDA recommends that the retaining walls be stepped to avoid sheer heights along the public roads and be constructed from used stone using the traditional dry method to allow flora and fauna to thrive. Also, despite the several requests for additional structures and facilities during the public consultation, the GRDA recommends that no additional buildings or facilities be developed as part of this project.

With regards to noise pollution, the mitigation measures which were initially proposed shall be implemented. Through these mitigation measures, noise will be dealt with by the airfield design, clever use of vegetation, times of aircraft operations, Inter-Island air service aeroplane selection and special modifications, and operational and circuit procedures. These mitigation measures are explained in more detail in the Regional Impact Assessment Report.

Similarly, adverse impacts on air quality, due to the introduction of airlink STOL aircraft, shall be addressed through proper mitigation measures. The GRDA recommends that the Inter-Island air service provider be encouraged to adopt an all-electric aircraft fleet. This can be done using different means such as incentivising the operator to shift towards electric aircraft or through the tender document so that only those operators who submit their intention to operate with electric aircraft would be allowed to operate from the proposed airfield. The GRDA also recommends that residents and tourists who make use of the airlink transport service be encouraged to make use of the public transport to mitigate impact on air quality, as well as impacts on traffic flow, road accessibility, and vehicle parking requirements. This measure shall be accompanied by an enhanced public transport service that meets the expected demand and be in sync with scheduled Inter-Island arrivals and departures, as part of a wider sustainable mobility plan for the island of Gozo.

Regarding the proposed infrastructure, the GRDA acknowledges that the proposed 445-metre runway would exclude certain operations from taking place at the proposed Gozo Rural Airfield, and consequently exclude certain economic benefits. In this regard, the GRDA supports the proposed runway length and airfield design, as it is based on a compromise between the economic benefits and the negative environmental impacts. Since, the proposed 445-metre runway allows for the introduction of a feasible Inter-Island air transport service and the development of a General Aviation ecosystem, the protection of nearby agricultural land shall be prioritised.

With regards to fuel availability, following the extensive feedback received from several players involved in the aviation industry, the GRDA recommends that a fuel depot station be incorporated for day-to-day needs instead of being restricted only for emergency use. Aprons 1 and 4, which are the only two parts which shall be entirely or partially hard surfaced, shall be the only two sites considered for the installation of a fixed or mobile fuel depot station at the Gozo Rural Airfield. In this regard, the GRDA would like to highlight the importance of taking on board the groundwater protective measures and other safety measures recommended by ERA, if an underground refuelling bay is installed. These measures are explained in Section 6.2 of the Regional Impact Assessment Report.

In this context, GRDA also recommends the installation of aircraft tie downs. Although acknowledging the importance of hangars for aircraft maintenance and parking requirements, the GRDA recommends that the rural setting of the airfield be maintained and hence these shall not be incorporated as part of the final proposal.

A subject which was thoroughly discussed by a wide range of stakeholders pertained the terminal building and terminal related facilities and services. The GRDA agrees with most of the recommendations received in relation to this subject. These recommendations are explained in detail in Section 6.2 of the Regional Impact Assessment Report. The GRDA recommends that these suggestions are given due consideration. In particular, the GRDA recommends that the passenger terminal incorporates check-in facilities, including baggage drop off, and security facilities. Such facilities enable international travellers making use of the airlink service to directly access the departure boarding gates at MIA, without the need of passing through MIA security gates. This would reduce the overall travelling time and make the service more efficient.

The airfield operations and procedures were beyond the scope of the RIAS. Despite this, the subject of airfield operations was thoroughly discussed during the consultation process by a wide range of stakeholders. Consequently, given the extensive input and recommendations on the subject, these recommendations were assessed and duly considered.

In this regard, the GRDA recommends that the government maintains an active role in the management of the airfield to ensure that the main objectives of this intervention are attained, even if these might be less profitable than other activities. Also, regarding the operational procedures of the Inter-Island air transport service, the GRDA recommends the following points to ensure maximum service take-up and consequently its success.

- A method of operation identical to the one used for connecting flights, whereby passengers using the airlink service are able to directly check-in their flights and undergo security checks at the Gozo Rural Airfield, without the need to redo these procedures at MIA. Such method of operation enables travellers making use of the airlink service to directly access the departure boarding gates at MIA. This would make the process more efficient, reduce the overall travelling time, and consequently enhance service take-up.
- Providing a parking slot for the Inter-Island aircraft at either Apron 8 or 9 at MIA, to reduce distance to the terminal, and hence reduce transfer time. Considering the significantly long transfer time from the landing spot at Luqa to the terminal, way back in the 90s, when the helicopter operated by the Malta Air Charter used to park on Apron 4, the parking slot shall be an important consideration when planning the airlink operating procedures.
- Handling of passengers, who are making use of the airlink service, be facilitated at MIA, such that the transfer time from landing at Luqa airport to the terminal (departure boarding gates) be minimised as much as possible. This would be crucial

for the success of the service and would ensure that the gains (saved time) obtained from using the airlink service would not be offset by delays at the Luqa airport.

- The Inter-Island air transport schedule and timings to correspond with departures and arrivals at the Malta International airport. This would improve the airlink's service efficiency and enhance service take-up. Despite recommendations from some stakeholders to possibly extend operating hours beyond those proposed (06:00 hours and 01:00 hours local time) to cater for certain arrivals and departures at MIA, the GRDA recommends that the service does not extend beyond 1:00 am to mitigate impacts of noise pollution.

Conclusion

The GRDA, being the Authority responsible for coordinating the Regional Impact Assessment process and being actively involved in the process, concludes that the proposed project commands the approval of the majority of the impacted communities and stakeholders, especially if the recommendations suggested in this report are taken on board.

In light of the outcomes of the RIA study, summarised above in this report and the in Regional Impact Assessment report, the GRDA endorses the implementation of the proposed Gozo Rural Airfield project. The GRDA believes that the benefits emanating from the proposed project far outweigh the drawbacks of the project. The proposed project would introduce significant benefits for the whole Gozitan community and the island's economy. The latter is an important point, since the diversification of the Gozitan economy will ensure that Gozo continues to be an active contributor to the national economy. Considering the impact, and also the financial layout when compared to other national projects that have been undertaken, this is an initiative which is implementable and would boost Gozitan economy and society both in the short and long term.



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