

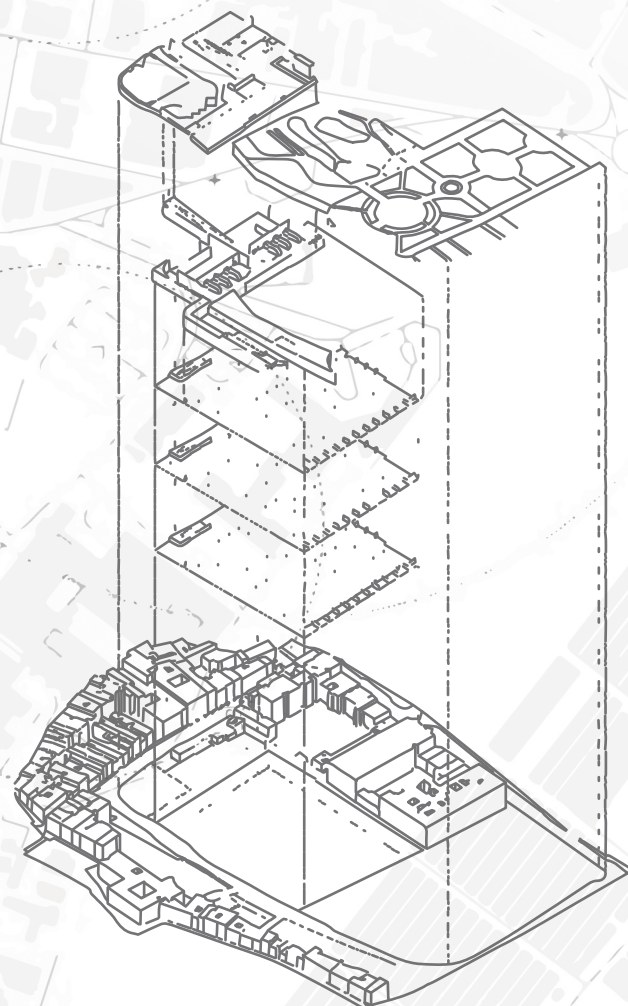


GOZO REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

GRDA Feedback Statement

Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading

December 2023



PUBLISHED BY

GOZO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

75, Republic Street, Victoria - Gozo, Malta

Tel: +356 22156338

www.grda.mt

Publication date: December 2023

This publication may not be used in any format or medium.

This material is property of the Gozo Regional Development Authority.

Any queries regarding this publication should be sent on: info@grda.mt.

Designed by the GRDA. © Copyright 2023.

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Background & Overview of Proposal.....	3
Public Consultation Methodology.....	5
Stakeholders Consulted	7
Summary of Stakeholder Feedback	7
Common Feedback Themes.....	8
Questions raised during the consultation process and GRDA response.....	18

Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading

Feedback by the Gozo Regional Development Authority

Introduction

The Feedback Statement report is being prepared by the Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) following the conclusion of the public consultation on the proposed Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading. The consultation process was launched by the GRDA on the 26th of June and was concluded on 1st September 2023. This public consultation was used as a means to engage with stakeholders and assess the proposed vision. It is important to note that this process was not conducted as part of a Regional Impact Assessment Study (RIAS).¹

Through the consultation process, the GRDA sought feedback on the proposed vision, including the proposed concept to transform an existing parking area in Victoria into a green park, with an underlying car park. During this process the Authority actively engaged with the public and various stakeholders, who played an integral role in the ongoing effort to draw a sustainable solution and a holistic plan aimed at fostering a vibrant and inclusive urban environment in Victoria.

This feedback report provides a summary of the consultation methodology, the feedback received from various stakeholders, including national entities and NGOs, on the Vision Document, as well as the Authority's response to the main points raised from such feedback. Details of individuals that have contributed to the consultation process are not included in this Feedback Document due to issues related to privacy, however, their views were equally taken on board.

Background & Overview of Proposal

Victoria's geographical context, administrative role and presence of cultural and heritage sites were prime considerations for the proposal presented. Victoria, which is the largest and the most prominent locality of Gozo, having an area of 2.9 km² and a total population of over seven thousand people, is the centre point in Gozo in terms of the road network and provides the only route for commuting between several of its surrounding villages.

¹ https://grda.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GRDA_Regional-Impact-Assessment-System-revised_02.02.22.pdf.

Being the social and economic centre of Gozo, rendered the locality of Victoria more vulnerable to urbanisation and population growth. In addition, being a main tourist area in Gozo as well as a major passage-through for most activities, the city of Victoria is increasingly facing challenges related to urbanization, including lack of open spaces where one can integrate with nature, as well as traffic congestion and transport related issues.

In view of these challenges, the GRDA presented its Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading, on the 23rd of June. This vision aims to address some of the major challenges facing the locality of Victoria in particular and Gozo in general, namely lack of open spaces, lack of parking spaces, and traffic congestion.

The vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading was devised through a careful and coordinated design and planning effort, based on the following overarching principles:

- i. **Encourage community vitality through a mix of uses:** Design of new infrastructure, and open spaces that accommodate and encourage a wide variety of uses to support an active and diverse community.
- ii. **Integrate mobility, parking, and public spaces to achieve a transformation towards people centred streets:** Rethinking of public and parking spaces to enable a pedestrian-oriented city, improve the quality and walkability of the streetscape, and maximize active frontages.
- iii. **Promote greening and landscaping:** Greening and landscaping improve the quality of public and open spaces, as well as streets.
- iv. **Create high quality open spaces:** A network of well-designed green spaces, walkways, and pedestrian oriented streetscapes provide a variety of experiences for residents, shoppers, and visitors.
- v. **Promote public participation:** The process entailed active participation of several stakeholders and the general public, as outlined in the following section.

GRDA's vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading outlines actions that can address key challenges, including mobility and transport, and gentrification. The proposed actions could serve as a prototype for similar urban upgrading proposals in other locations, providing a model for sustainable and responsible urban development. Through this proposal, the GRDA presented concepts for the future layout of the city that considers both the existing and proposed open spaces, and roads.

Central to the presented vision is the transformation of the existing parking area in Victoria (adjacent to the Villa Rundle Gardens and the Bus Terminus), and adjacent playing field into a green and open space with an underground car park accommodating a significant number of vehicles. This proposal covers an area of around 22,000 square meters and has the potential to redesign the entire concept of mobility in Victoria.

The proposal seeks to contribute towards the regeneration of the area and challenge the prevailing car-centric hierarchy by prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists, thereby making several streets more

accessible to them. It aims to foster a vibrant public life that meets our social, environmental, political, and cultural objectives. Furthermore, by incorporating nature into daily life and creating public spaces, the proposal aims to create a sense of community and enhance the overall liveability of the area.

Public Consultation Methodology

The Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) views community involvement and stakeholder participation, in any initiative that impacts Gozitan residents and visitors, as crucial. Thus, as part of the urban design process focused on the Urban Upgrade of Victoria, the GRDA has sought feedback from a broad set of stakeholders on its proposed vision. To ensure that the community and all interested stakeholders are informed about the proposed Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrade, a comprehensive consultation process was planned. The consultation process was developed to enable GRDA to identify who needs to be consulted, notify them, allow them enough time to respond, inform them of what is being proposed, and publish the feedback received in the form of a document referred to as Feedback Statement. This process resulted in an extensive public engagement, which included inputs from national entities, local councils, Gozo associations and organisations, foundations and societies, NGOs, business communities, and other relevant stakeholders with different backgrounds and expertise.

The public consultation process was launched on 26th June 2023 via a press conference, followed by a press release. The press conference was addressed by Minister Camilleri and GRDA's CEO, Mr. Mario Borg, in the presence of the GRDA's Chairman, Mr. Michael Grech, and GRDA Board members. The launch of the public consultation was also communicated to the public through various other media channels including GRDA's social media channels and local news portals. Via the press release, GRDA's CEO invited the public to participate in the consultation process, which offered an opportunity to those interested to give their contribution. The CEO emphasized that the concept presented is open to material changes, and thus, valid contributions would be considered in the subsequent design and planning phases.

As part of the consultation process, visual communication material (videos and high-resolution images) was published on GRDA's website and on its social media channels to inform the public on the proposal and to invite interested people to contribute to the consultation process. The main document that outlined GRDA Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading, along with a brief document which introduced the proposed vision, were published on GRDA's website.

The public consultation, which initiated on 26th June, extended till 1st of September. A period of ten weeks for the public consultation ensured that any interested stakeholder had enough time to participate in the public consultation. Throughout the consultation period, the GRDA engaged with the public and several different stakeholders, mainly through one-to-one meetings, and through a public meeting. The GRDA held over 10 bilateral meetings with government bodies, NGOs, and other relevant stakeholders.

The Authority also organised a public meeting, which was held at the GRDA Conference Room, Victoria. The public engagement event enabled the Authority to explain the proposed vision and present its proposal to the participants, while soliciting their input. An expert in the field of urban design and architecture was present for the public meeting to explain the concepts and design strategies proposed for the urban regeneration of Victoria. Those who were unable to attend the public meeting had the opportunity to engage in the consultation process through written contributions to the GRDA via the electronic mail address published on the GRDA's website.

Date	Public Consultation Meeting
29th August 2023, 10:00 – 12:00	Public Consultation meeting – held in English

Public Consultation meeting organized by the GRDA

The public consultation process was designed to achieve the following goals:

- i. Foster a transparent and inclusive urban design process.
- ii. Engage a range of stakeholders with varying backgrounds and expertise to participate in the process.
- iii. Increase awareness within the Gozitan community that a proposal for the urban upgrading of Victoria is being devised.
- iv. Provide opportunities for people to formulate an opinion and make their informed views on the proposal known.
- v. Improve the relevance, quality and value-added of the proposed vision.
- vi. Act as a source of opinions and recommendations on possible improvements.

All feedback and the views expressed by the several stakeholders who were consulted on the proposed vision, and any recommendations which were raised during the public consultation were recorded and analysed. All the information obtained during the public consultation was verified. Also, the consultation process ensured that the GRDA did not rely only on opinions from one group or few stakeholders with specific interests who may have dominated the public consultation or were the most efficient in delivering their views and professional expert knowledge. The GRDA consulted a broad set of stakeholders such that the outcome of the public consultation is impartial as much as possible and reflect the views and opinion of the wider community, avoiding a distorted consultation result. A summary of the stakeholder feedback, the main feedback themes, and common questions raised during the consultation are presented later in this document.

Stakeholders Consulted

Stakeholder engagement was extensive, with various stakeholders providing their views and feedback during the public consultation meeting held on the 29th of August, and through one-to-one meetings and bilateral meetings with government bodies, local councils, and other relevant stakeholders. Several other stakeholders and individuals who were unable to attend the public meeting engaged in the consultation process through written contributions.

Stakeholders who provided their feedback on GRDA's Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrade include:

- National government entities, including Transport Malta (TM), Heritage Malta, Environment and Resources Authority (ERA), Civil Protection Department (CPD), Foundation for Medical Services (FMS), Malta Police Force, and Project Green;
- Victoria Local Council, and Victoria Football Clubs;
- Local businesses, chambers, and associations from the business sector, including the Gozo Business Chamber (GBC);
- Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), including Ghawdix, Din l-Art Helwa, Nadur Nadif, and Project Aegle Foundation (sustainable mobility NGO);
- Non-profit making organisations and societies, including Malta Sociological Association (MSA), Archeological Society Malta, La Stella Philharmonic Society, Leone Philharmonic Society, and Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (SPCA); and
- Private Victoria and Gozitan residents, and the general public.

Summary of Stakeholder Feedback

The GRDA sought feedback on its Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrade, with a focus on the identified vision, overarching principles, and design strategies, guiding the urban design process. The Vision document was used as the basis for the public consultation, through which the GRDA sought feedback from the various stakeholders.

Through the public consultation process, the Authority received over 60 contributions, which included general feedback and comments on the presented vision, concerns, recommendations, and ideas. The feedback and contributions received from a diverse array of stakeholders reflected the public opinion on GRDA's vision for Victoria Urban Upgrade. The primary contributions and feedback received from the various stakeholders revolved around the proposed transformation of an existing parking space into a green park, with an emphasis on mobility and urban planning related aspects, including the proposal's potential implications for the road network, road accessibility, traffic flow, and multi-modal transportation, as well as the potential implications

on existing facilities, such as the existing football pitch and playing field, among other pertinent subjects. Other feedback highlighted limitations and general concerns in relation to the presented vision and proposal, including concerns regarding waste disposal and management, water management, and potential archeological discoveries, among other pertinent issues highlighted during the public consultation. Other contributions and input to the public consultation focused on existing challenges that are hindering progress in Victoria, and potential sustainable solutions to address these challenges and upgrade the urban environment of Victoria.

Table 1, presented below, gives an indication of the feedback received in terms of the source, that is whether from local councils, national entities, football clubs, NGOs, non-profit making organisations and societies, local businesses, business chambers, other organisations, private individuals, and Gozo residents. Feedback was mainly received through written contributions via electronic mail, the public consultation meeting, as well as bilateral meetings.

Consultative Person/Group	Indicative number of feedback
Local councils & national entities	8
NGOs, foundations, and societies	8
Football clubs	3
Business Community	6
Private individuals and residents	37
Total	62

Table 1: Feedback received in terms of consultation source.

Most of the feedback received was highly relevant and was within the scope of the public consultation. The GRDA has carefully considered all the feedback and verified new information obtained during the consultation process. The following sections of this Feedback Statement outline the feedback received during the consultation process and provide the GRDA's response to common questions raised during the public consultation.

Common Feedback Themes

The Authority notes with satisfaction the response and quality of the feedback received during the consultation process. Several individuals with different backgrounds and expertise, voiced their ideas and concerns, while others made valid recommendations in relation to the presented Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading. These contributions and recommendations would be used by GRDA in the subsequent phases of the proposal's development to improve the proposal, such that it better reflects the present and future needs of Victoria. The ultimate aim is to draw a sustainable

solution that addresses existing challenges and creates a vibrant and inclusive environment.

The contributions and main feedback points put forward by several stakeholders, NGOs, entities, and other individuals during this process have been organised into eight common feedback themes. These key themes are presented below.

1. Proposed vision, and strategies

The proposed green urban upgrade of Victoria to sensitively improve the urban and rural landscapes was very well received by the vast majority of stakeholders who offered their feedback. It was noted positively that the urban upgrade proposal for Victoria was not considered in isolation but was looked at within a more comprehensive vision for the island of Gozo, specifically within the context of designing a long-term and holistic sustainable plan for the island of Gozo.

In principle, most of the views from individuals, national entities, and non-governmental organizations, embraced the Vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading, especially because the presented vision is in line not only with the national strategies aligned to make Gozo and Malta more sustainable, but also global strategies which prioritise the protection of the environment. The proposal is in line with the strategic direction provided by the draft National Strategy for the Environment 2050, particularly with respect to open spaces and urban greening. It also aligns with the draft National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) 2030, Gozo's goal of achieving climate neutrality, as well as the Gozo Regional Development Strategy.

Several individuals and organizations who contributed to the public consultation process recognized the genuine efforts to increase access to green open public spaces, which provide numerous potential benefits and contribute positively to the well-being of residents and visitors. Also, the proposed integration of a parking facility as part of the green urban initiative was commended, given the existing shortage of parking spaces in Victoria.

Other contributions stressed the importance of giving due consideration to transport aspects, especially considering that the proposal entails the transformation of a parking area near the Victoria Bus Terminus, which is a significant transport hub in Gozo. In this regard, some stakeholders proposed that this proposal be integrated as part of a wider transportation and mobility plan. This offers an opportunity to enhance the transport system of the island, potentially through the integration of more efficient and sustainable public transport, and the development of alternative modes of transport, which might potentially contribute to reducing traffic and congestion and consequently improve air quality.

Another opportunity which was identified through the public consultation is an opportunity for the proposal to act as a test bed for future urban upgrading proposals. The proposal presents a chance to not only transform the site earmarked in Victoria but also to establish a dynamic test bed for experimenting user co-creation approaches and integrating research and innovation processes in real life settings and communities. Such a test-bed environment could contribute to the promotion of innovation in urban mobility by enabling participatory processes that help

identify better the local mobility problems, to develop shared objectives and identify mobility strategies, policies, and solutions that can be widely accepted, reaching the desired impact. Also, new technologies, and approaches to mobility could be explored in such a controlled test-bed environment.

The proposed urban upgrade can also contribute to a holistic approach to gradually transform local urban areas to integrate green infrastructure and green spaces to contribute towards the creation of an interconnected and functional national network of such spaces.

2. Concept scheme: Proposed architectural and landscape design actions

The presented vision for Victoria urban upgrading centres around the Victoria Park proposal, which aims to incorporate responsible and ethical urban design principles within a project that prioritizes an integration of nature into daily life. The Victoria Park proposal includes architectural and landscape design actions, such as public open spaces, and green parks. Despite this being a preliminary concept with the presented visuals being conceptual sketches to portray the proposal visually, several contributions received during the public consultation focused on these concept sketches and design actions.

Several individuals and stakeholders recommended sports and outdoor playing facilities to be integrated as part of the proposed green park. More specifically, various stakeholders, who contributed to the public consultation, expressed a need to incorporate a play area for children and a green football pitch, as part of the proposal. In this regard, considering that demand for such facilities would become even more relevant given that the proposed park is expected to attract more people, some stakeholders emphasized the importance that this proposed project does not displace existing facilities and uses onto land outside the development zone.

Other feedback received during the public consultation emphasized the importance of focusing on initiatives and actions that deliver on the quality of life of Gozo residents, the environment, sustainability, and on Gozo's identity and distinctive characteristics. It was recommended to consider strategies that simplify the project's design, enhance cost efficiency, and improve long-term maintainability, such that any intervention continues benefitting the community over a long time. It was also recommended to adopt strategies which keep in consideration the vulnerable sections of a community, including persons with disability.

With regards to landscaping, it was recommended to prioritize soft scaping over hard scaping and avoid unnecessary structures and accessories. It was advised to prioritize the use of native species and ensure that the proposed green park be compatible with the local climate, by referring to the Guidelines on trees, shrubs and plants for planting and landscaping in the Maltese islands. Also, it was recommended to retain and integrate the existing mature trees on site, and incorporate a number of other large mature trees, as part of the project design. These trees would provide a tree canopy cover, creating shaded areas which are vital for encouraging pedestrianization in an island characterized by high weather temperatures, especially during the summer.

Other contributions with regards to landscaping emphasized the importance of giving due consideration to noise pollution. It was pointed out that the proposed green park has the potential to be a noise quiet area, through appropriate noise abatement measures. Such measures could include the adoption of green infrastructure such as green walls, which act as noise barriers, and the use of low noise asphalt on the surrounding roads, which could help to reduce noise at source. In this regard, the water fountain included in the concept designs was also identified as a potential noise abatement solution to mask unwanted noise.

3. Sustainability and EVs Charging Infrastructure

A topic which was discussed during the consultation process was that of sustainability. Most stakeholders who provided their feedback, embraced the proposal's commitment to sustainable urban development, and community well-being. The proposal also contributes positively towards the environment and maintains ecological balance.

In light of the above, some stakeholders noted that the Victoria urban upgrading proposal has the potential to serve as a model for responsible urban development. Also, it was pointed out that through the introduction of nature-based solutions, the proposal has the potential to contribute towards climate change mitigation and adaptation. With regards to nature-based solutions, it was suggested to refer to the Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDS), which provides the policy framework for the implementation of such solutions in Malta.

Other feedback received during the public consultation emphasized the importance of considering the impact of the proposal on air quality, through a study focused on pollution and air quality, that also takes in consideration the impact of the proposal on traffic flow.

A number of other measures aimed at mitigating air and light pollution were recommended during the public consultation. These include a recommendation to install downward facing full cut-off lighting fixtures in public areas and roads to mitigate light pollution, and smart lighting systems to mitigate air and light pollution. It was also recommended to incorporate smart parking systems as part of the proposal, with the aim of alleviating the inefficiencies associated with the futile circulation of vehicles around Victoria in search of parking spaces, and consequently minimizing air pollution.

Other contributions with regards to sustainability outlined the importance of integrating an electrical substation and other required charging infrastructure for electric vehicles (EVs) and electric bikes into the envisioned project for Victoria Urban Upgrading. It was advised that such charging infrastructure be designed to accommodate electric buses, given the intention of electrifying the entire public transport fleet in Gozo.

Technical advice on this subject recommended that EV charging stations be primarily situated above street level, with the option of having charging stations underground being avoided. This recommendation is rooted in the fire risk associated with EVs during the charging process. Additionally, in relation to EV charging stations, it was recommended that any charging pillars

integrated as part of the proposal, be designed in a parallel configuration, allowing the vehicles to face each other while charging. Such arrangement would mitigate fire propagation in the event that one of the charging vehicles catches fire.

The technical advice, which was sought in relation to infrastructure, safety, and other necessities attributed to EVs, also recommended a set of requirements concerning the design of the multi-level car park. One such requirement is that the multi-level underground car park should have multiple access points to facilitate potential rescue and firefighting operations in the event that an electric vehicle catches fire. A number of fire hydrants should also be incorporated as part of the design of a multi-level car park, particularly at each entrance point. This requirement is vital as fire hydrants, which should ideally be located just outside the facility, enable swift and expedite firefighting operations.

4. Transport infrastructure, urban mobility, and connectivity

Another pertinent topic which was thoroughly discussed during the public consultation was that of urban mobility, transport infrastructure, and connectivity, with a focus on road infrastructure. While commending the vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading, several stakeholders emphasized the need for the streets in Victoria, adjacent to the site earmarked for upgrading, to be incorporated as part of the Victoria upgrading proposal and be given the necessary upgrade in terms of pavement condition and accessibility. The streets which were referred to during the public consultation include Triq Putirjal, Triq Giorgio Borg Olivier, Triq Ninu Cremona, Triq San Ġuzepp Labre', Triq I-Arcisqof Pietru Pace, Triq Santa Marta, Triq Salvatore Psaila, and Triq I-Għaxra ta' Ġunju 1887.

Considering that the proposed vision revolves around the existing parking area in Victoria, situated directly adjacent to the Bus Terminus and Villa Rundle Gardens, and in close proximity to the recently constructed public primary school, the Gozo Museum, and the sports complex and aquatic centre, all of which attract a significant number of visitors, several stakeholders emphasized the importance of providing the necessary upgrades to the road infrastructure between these amenities, to promote and facilitate safe and active travel between these public amenities.

Within this context, the inclusion of comprehensive and carefully considered cycling and pedestrian routes towards and around the proposed park were recommended, as part of a wider cycling and pedestrian network. It was emphasized that such a cycling network and the accompanying cycling infrastructure should aim to simplify the combined use of cycling (or other emerging modes of transport, such as scooters) and public transport, with the ultimate aim of shifting towards more sustainable modes of transport and challenge the prevailing car-centric hierarchy.

Another suggestion regarding cycling and pedestrianization proposed the adoption of the CROW principles, which are internationally recognized guidelines for designing pedestrian and cyclist friendly spaces. These encompass five key design principles for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure: Cohesion, Directness, Safety, Comfort and Attractiveness. It was pointed out that by adhering to these principles, the proposed urban upgrade can ensure that the connectivity infrastructure not only promotes active travel but also contributes to an overall enhanced urban environment.

Other contributions outlined the importance that the proposed urban development be supported by a revision of the road classification network of Victoria. Classifying roads ensures that Victoria is well-connected, making it easier for people to move from one place to another. A well-designed road network with proper classifications improves accessibility to different areas, promoting efficient movement within the locality. A revision of the road classification network helps determine which roads should prioritize pedestrians, cyclists, or motor vehicles. It would also help in traffic management, by designating different types of roads for specific functions. For instance, road classification would distinguish between arterial roads which connect different parts of the island, and local roads which serve neighbourhoods and can handle lower traffic volumes. This separation would help maintain smoother traffic flow, road safety and reduce congestion.

In addition to recommendations related to Victoria's road classification network and road infrastructure, various other contributions related to other facets of Victoria's transport infrastructure were received during the public consultation. These include a number of suggestions in relation to the Victoria Bus Terminus, including a proposal to extend the proposed green park over the area currently used as a Bus Terminus, with the latter facility being shifted underground.

Another recommendation related to the Bus Terminus and the proposed vision is to allocate more space for public transport and other sustainable modes of transport. In this regard, it was further recommended to explore the possibility of upgrading the existing bus terminus and the nearby parking area to a multimodal transport hub. Such a multimodal hub, which is a transport centre where various modes of transport (such as buses, taxis, private vehicles, scooters, bicycles, and motorbikes) converge and intersect, would allow passengers to transfer seamlessly and safely between different modes of travel. A multi-modal hub would promote sustainable mobility by reducing reliance on private vehicles. For instance, such a transport hub would allow visitors to park their car and move around Victoria and its surroundings with more sustainable modes of transport. It could also facilitate sustainable and efficient travel between Victoria's centre and other hotspots in Gozo, such as Mgarr Harbour, Xlendi, and Marsalforn, and to the multimodal hub in Xewkija.

Considering the strategic location, nearby commercial and tourist establishments, it was pointed out that the proposal has the opportunity to incorporate a last mile delivery hub, that includes logistic stations and storage areas (lockers), to streamline the ultimate phase of the delivery process.

5. Parking infrastructure, parking management, and traffic flow

Several other contributions, related to urban mobility and transport infrastructure, revolved on the proposed multi-level car park and its potential impact on traffic flow and transportation in Victoria. In this regard, a main concern which was raised during the public consultation centred around the number of underground parking spaces being proposed. The proposal presented an indicative number of circa 800 car spaces being made available underneath the green park, which is a considerable increase from the 300 car spaces currently available. Considering this, whilst acknowledging that important consideration was given to sustainability and promotion of active mobility, a number of stakeholders expressed concern that the proposed increase in

the number of parking spaces would incentivize the use of private vehicles, rather than other more sustainable modes of transport such as public transport. Moreover, considering that such parking spaces were proposed to be concentrated in one area, several stakeholders expressed concern that roads leading to this proposed multi-level car park would become a bottleneck, leading to traffic congestion. In this regard, it was recommended to seek other potential sites, such as the public parking at Pjazza l-Assedju ta' Ghawdex, that could host an underground car park. This would enable parking spaces to be distributed over two or more sites, rather than being concentrated in one area. Other stakeholders remarked that the creation of parking spaces is not inherently negative, as long as this is balanced by a comprehensive strategy that prioritizes sustainable mobility options.

Several other contributions concerning the number of parking spaces were received during the public consultation. One such contribution recommended that the existing parking area be reorganized to marginally increase the number of parking spaces at a minimum cost, while using the funds allocated for the proposed multi-level car park on other initiatives that deliver on the quality of life, well-being, and sustainability.

Other stakeholders recommended a demand analysis to be conducted as part of a parking capacity requirement study for Victoria. Such study would provide an indication of the demand for parking spaces, and thus indicate the number of parking spaces that should be made available. Also, considering that a multi-level car park would attract a significant number of vehicles, numerous stakeholders pointed out that such a proposal necessitates a Traffic Impact Assessment to assess the impact of the proposal on the traffic flow in and around Victoria. Such a study would enable access points to the underground car park to be optimally designed such that vehicular movement to and from the parking be properly managed, limiting the impact of such movement on the traffic flow in Victoria.

Within this context, other points drawn from the consultation process focused on potential solutions aimed at alleviating traffic congestion in Victoria. One such contribution recommended a study to assess the feasibility of constructing a ring road around Victoria to alleviate traffic congestion and potentially enable certain streets such as Republic Street to be pedestrianized. It was further suggested to explore the viability of establishing a ring road by utilizing existing streets through a comprehensive traffic flow optimization exercise.

In this regard, a number of stakeholders who participated in the public meeting highlighted that urban sprawl over the years and increased sensitivity towards the environment have limited the possibility of constructing a ring road around Victoria. Alternatively, it was suggested to assess the feasibility of tunnelling underneath Victoria, such that traffic flow could be diverted away from Republic Street and eventually achieve a transformation towards people centred streets.

Other possible solutions to alleviate traffic congestion were recommended during the public consultation. These include replacing the existing public transport fleet with smaller electric buses, which are more adequate for the relatively narrow streets in Victoria and Gozo. Another recommendation entailed designating appropriate areas where private coaches could stop for loading and unloading passengers, with the aim of minimizing the impact of such activity on

traffic flow. Such bus layovers would enable private coaches and public transport vehicles to pause and perform loading/unloading activities safely and efficiently without aggravating traffic congestion.

6. Waste management

Waste management and issues associated with waste disposal were thoroughly discussed during the public consultation, with several stakeholders expressing concern over the amount of excavation waste expected to be generated if the proposed concept is pursued. The excavation to construct an underground multi-level car park would create large volume of excavation waste, which might be challenging to manage. In this regard, it was recommended to explore adequate measures for reutilizing excavated material, and to prioritize sustainable options.

The feedback received during the consultation period also highlighted the importance of waste management following the completion of the proposed green park and accompanying facilities. It was recommended to include waste management facilities into the envisioned green park. More specifically, it was recommended to incorporate separate collection bins for the separate fractions of waste to promote and improve waste collection and management. Such waste management facilities and systems should be practical and manageable. For instance, bins should be ratproof, leak resistant, and include relevant communication labels. Also, it was recommended to consider CCTV cameras and other surveillance equipment at collections points to facilitate compliance and enforcement efforts.

7. Water catchment and management

Other points drawn from the consultation process emphasized the importance of addressing challenges associated with water management, such as surface runoff, by factoring in such challenges in the subsequent design stages. In this regard, some stakeholders recommended detailed studies aimed at understanding the movement and flow of water both above and underneath the surface of the area earmarked for upgrading, and the surrounding areas. Considering that the geology of the area is characterized by blue clay composition, it was emphasized that such studies, which might include geological and water management studies, are critical for the proposed urban upgrade to be successful and achieve the desired objectives. Otherwise, if such factors are not given the required importance, the risk of floods in certain areas at or near the area earmarked for upgrading might be exacerbated in events of heavy rainfall.

Other contributions focused on water catchment measures, including recommendations to incorporate water reservoirs and rainwater harvesting systems as part of the proposal. Such measures enable runoff water to be capture and stored, and then be used for irrigation purposes, enabling an all-year-round green park. Prioritizing soft landscaping over hard landscaping was highlighted as another potential solution to address surface runoff.

Technical advice, received during the consultation process, further highlighted the importance of incorporating water reservoirs and rainwater harvesting systems in the subsequent detailed designs. The reason being that the proposed multi-level car park necessitates a huge provision of water readily available on site for firefighting purposes. In the context of rescue and firefighting, having a huge provision of water readily accessible in the vicinity of the underground multi-level car park is critical for quickly addressing fire and preventing it from spreading. In this regard, an automated fire suppression sprinkler system was also recommended for the underground parking facility. Such a fire suppression system, which would ideally utilize water from site, would inhibit fire propagation in any potential firefighting operations.

8. Geological and archeological considerations

Another pertinent topic which was thoroughly discussed during the public consultation was that of geology, with a focus on the geological characteristics of the terrain underlying the site proposed for a multi-level underground car park. As indicated by the Geological Map of the Maltese Islands, which can be accessed through the Continental Shelf Department website, this proposed area in Victoria predominantly features blue clay formations. Considering this, it was recommended to explore alternative sites in Victoria that have more suitable geological characteristics, to develop an underground multi-level car park, than the proposed site.

Within this context, a comprehensive geotechnical investigation along the entire perimeter of the site proposed for a multi-level car park was recommended to thoroughly examine the geological characteristics of the site. Such an investigation would be useful to accurately determine the geological characteristics of the site, including the geological structure and geological composition of the underlying terrain. Other geological aspects which could be determined through the proposed geological investigation include the depth of the bedrock from the existing surface, as well as the possible presence of caverns and voids. Information obtained through this investigation, including details on geological structure, bedrock depth, and position, would play a crucial role in the subsequent stages of detailed design. This would enable more accurate capital expenditure calculations, offering insights into the feasibility of the proposal, and determine the viable number of car park stories that could be developed.

If the proposal is endorsed and pursued, geological information could be useful to assess the possibility of discovering archaeological remains during the proposal's execution stage. In this regard, competent stakeholders stressed the importance that the proposed urban upgrading is not achieved at the detriment of any potential archaeological or historical heritage which might be present within the area proposed for upgrading. Thus, the possibility of discovering any archeological or historical heritage should be given important consideration in the eventual design and planning stages, especially, when considering that the site proposed for development lies within an Area of Archaeological Importance (Class A) and an Urban Conservation Area.

More specifically, the proposed upgrade lies in the area between the ancient city of Gaulos and its extramural burial site. This is supported by remains along Triq ir-Repubblika, Villa Rundle Gardens

and Pjazza San Frangisk as well as other remains. In this regard, stakeholders expressed concern that the proposed underground parking facilities, would likely disturb any existing archaeological deposits during construction phases, especially when considering the extensive excavation activities that would be required to develop underground parking facilities at the proposed site, which is quite extensive.

In view of the above, and of the exceptionally high and well-documented archaeological sensitivity and importance of the area in question, the following points and recommendations were drawn from technical advice sought during the public consultation:

- The consideration to move forward with this proposal should be preceded by a thorough Archaeological Impact Assessment. Such an assessment should apply appropriate methods, under the direction of experts and competent authorities. Appropriate archaeological impact assessment methods might include intensive remote sensing and representative sampling with archaeological sondages. Archaeological sampling might entail trenching along a number of points within the area. These methods are required to acquire a sound understanding of the extent and location of areas of higher archaeological sensitivity, the preservation of which needs to be an integral consideration throughout the design process, from concept to realization.
- Timeframes for completion of the proposal should take into account the archaeology related works that might need to be carried out, particularly as the proposal is extensive and the area has the potential for archaeological finds.
- Any works on site should be monitored at all times by an adequate number of approved archaeology monitors, under the supervision of the competent authorities, if the proposal moves forward.
- A clear plan for handling archaeological discoveries should be devised prior to commencement of works. One effective approach is to identify potential areas where works could be shifted while any discoveries encountered are investigated. Also, project designs should have an element of flexibility to allow changes in case of archaeological discoveries. Depending on the nature of discoveries, plans and designs should allow for the conservation of such heritage and its potential incorporation as part of the final project. For instance, in the case that tombs, or structural remains are encountered, it is essential that these are preserved in situ, and thus, plans and design be amended accordingly. Another possibility is to relocate such potential findings, if technically and financially feasible.

In this regard, considering that the area primarily consists of blue clay formations, it was pointed out that the possibility of encountering burial sites or tombs is minimal. This is because historical burials discovered in the vicinity have been found within the Upper Coralline Limestone Formation and Upper Globigerina Limestone. Meanwhile, it was pointed out that it is more probable to encounter structural remains in areas characterized by blue clay formations.

Questions raised during the consultation process and GRDA response

Along with the feedback and recommendations, that were summarized into common feedback themes in the section above, several relevant questions were put forward by a wide range of stakeholders, including NGOs, entities, and individuals. These questions mainly revolved around the proposed Victoria Park and underlying car park, and its implications on traffic flow, mobility, and community's well-being, among other aspects.

Other questions and feedback focused on financial and implementations aspects of the proposal, which were not within the main scope of the public consultation. The main aim of the public consultation was to seek the view of the public on the proposed vision and the urban upgrading concept presented. Despite this, the feedback which was not directly within this scope was still considered. In this regard, the GRDA sought to provide its response to the most common and relevant questions, which were received during the consultation process. These questions together with the corresponding response are presented below.

Q. What does the presented vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading entail, and how will existing facilities, such as the football pitch, playing field, and bus terminus, be affected?

A. The proposed urban upgrading aims to enhance Victoria's urban environment through responsible and ethical urban design principles and actions, central of which is the Victoria Park proposal. The latter entails transforming the existing parking area in Victoria, including the football ground and surrounding area, situated adjacent to the Bus Terminus and Villa Rundle Gardens, into a green park, with an underlying multi-level car park. The football pitch and playing field are proposed to be integrated as part of the Victoria Park. Meanwhile, the Bus Terminus was not integrated as part of the Victoria Park. Despite this, the Bus Terminus is fundamental in the presented vision for the urban upgrading of Victoria, which proposed that this facility remains in its current location.

It shall be noted that this initial proposal presented to the public is a preliminary concept intended to communicate the identified vision and design principles visually, with the presented visuals being conceptual sketches. Thus, the preliminary concepts presented to the public are subject to change. In this regard, no clear interventions or action plans were devised, at these preliminary stages. Different design options could attain the objectives identified for the urban upgrading of Victoria. The final designs and plans would depend on several factors, including the funds available, as well as other constraints which would have to be incorporated as part of the project. The feedback received would also be considered when devising the final plans.

Considering the feedback received and considering that the proposed Victoria Park would be expected to attract more people, it is expected that the demand for certain facilities, such as a play area for children and a football pitch, would become even more relevant. Such facilities could easily be integrated as part of the proposed Victoria Park, whose final layout and design would be

devised in the subsequent planning and design stages. As outlined earlier, several factors would be taken in consideration during these subsequent stages, including the public feedback.

In this regard, subsequent planning and design stages would build on the initial concept, which principally proposed a transformation of the existing parking area into a green park and open spaces for the Gozitan community, with parking spaces being relocated underground. The aim is to contribute towards the regeneration of the area, enhance the overall liveability of the area, and foster a vibrant public life that meets our social, environmental, political, and cultural objectives.

Q. What are the key challenges that the proposed vision for Victoria urban upgrading aims to address, and how will these challenges be tackled?

A. As the main administrative hub, hosting schools, law courts, and being a popular tourist destination, the locality of Victoria, faces numerous challenges such as lack of open spaces, shortage of parking spaces, traffic congestion, pollution, and other issues arising from the substantial influx of people. The proposed vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading aims to address these key challenges, namely the lack of open spaces, insufficient parking spaces, and traffic congestion.

The proposal to transform the existing parking area into a green park, and shift parking spaces underground, aims to catalyse the development of a network of well-designed green spaces, walkways, and pedestrian oriented streetscapes. The proposed multi-level underground car park would help address the lack of parking spaces in Victoria, while the overlying green park would provide much-needed open spaces for residents and visitors. The proposed increase in number of parking spaces, along with other parking management solutions, would also help alleviate traffic congestion by addressing the existing scenario where vehicles are constantly circling around Victoria looking for a parking space.

Also, due to insufficient parking spaces, vehicles are presently allowed to park in narrow roads, congested areas, and squares, significantly impacting Victoria's urban fabric, the quality of life of residents and visitors, as well as traffic flow. In this regard, the presented proposal intends to alleviate congestion through the provision of an increased number of underground parking spaces, which enables on-street parking to be restricted in certain areas and consequently improve traffic flow.

Furthermore, due to the ever-growing demand for parking spaces in Victoria, vehicles are consistently competing for space with pedestrians. On-street parking also restricts greening initiatives since much of the space currently available is dedicated for vehicle use. Consequently, pedestrianization in Victoria is restricted since streets and public spaces mainly prioritize vehicle use. In this regard, the proposed vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading aims to address these challenges by shifting vehicles to an underground parking facility and challenge the prevailing car-centric hierarchy by prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists, thereby making several streets more accessible to them. Additionally, the proposed vision aims to promote alternative modes of transport, which allow visitors to park their cars in the multi-level car park and move around Victoria and surroundings with more sustainable modes of transport.

These proposed initiatives and overarching vision were not considered in isolation but were looked at with a more comprehensive vision for the Island of Gozo. In this regard, the proposed vision and the emanating initiatives align with other plans and strategies for Gozo, including the Gozo Regional Development Strategy 2023-2033, the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP), as well as the Guidelines on Parking Management issued by the Local Councils Association. These plans and guidelines will be kept in consideration and referred to in the subsequent proposal development stages.

Q. What are the expected benefits of the proposed urban upgrading, and how will this cater to the needs of residents, visitors, and tourists?

A. The proposed urban upgrading is expected to bring several benefits to residents, visitors, and tourists, by addressing key challenges and creating a vibrant and inclusive urban environment. Some of the expected benefits include health and wellbeing benefits, environmental and sustainability benefits, as well as financial benefits.

One of the primary objectives of the proposed urban upgrading is to enhance the health and wellbeing of residents, and visitors by increasing the amount of green open spaces in the heart of Victoria. The creation of a green open space at the centre of Victoria would foster several positive effects. Accessible green spaces and natural environment have been proven to enhance wellbeing by improving air quality and promote stress reduction, relaxation, physical activity, and social interaction. Green open spaces also foster community cohesion. Studies have indicated that individuals residing in urban areas with ample green space experience less mental distress, anxiety, and depression. Moreover, such individuals enjoy greater overall wellbeing compared to those living in areas with limited green space. Furthermore, the proposal encourages the use of sustainable transportation modes, such as walking, cycling, and public transportation, fostering a more environmentally friendly and healthy lifestyle.

The proposed increase in number of parking spaces, the accompanying parking management solutions, enhanced traffic flow, as well as promotion of active and more sustainable modes of transport, all contribute to a more sustainable urban living, and provide environmental benefits. These include improved air quality and a cleaner environment due to reduced vehicle emissions.

Furthermore, the proposed urban upgrading is anticipated to have a positive impact on the locality's appeal to investors, visitors, and prospective residents. Public green spaces are frequently considered as tools to reshape a city's image and revitalize neglected properties for market re-entry. Numerous studies indicate a significant correlation between property value and proximity to parks and open green spaces. In this regard, the urban upgrading proposal is expected to contribute to the local economy by attracting businesses, tourists, and new residents.

Q. How would the proposed concept be financed?

A. The GRDA estimated the capital cost required for the preliminary Victoria Park concept. This

was based on several assumptions, and thus may undergo changes once the plans and designs are finalised. Furthermore, the estimated cost encompasses inherent risks associated with the demolition, construction, and finishing phases of the proposal. There are also other risks associated with the proposed project, including additional expenses in the event of unexpected archaeological discoveries, a greater inflation rate than originally envisioned in the baseline costs, and the likelihood of encountering shortages in available human resources. A Monte Carlo simulation was used to incorporate these risks as part of the estimated cost.

With regards to financing, different avenues of funding could be explored to finance the proposed Victoria Park. The GRDA is of the view that the presented proposal is eligible for financial support under the Sustainable Urban Development (SUD) Fund ring-fenced for Gozo. This fund receives partial financing from the European Regional Development Fund (2021-2027). Its primary objective is to promote urban green initiatives in Gozo and support ongoing structural reforms in the region. These reforms aim to enhance Gozo's competitiveness, vitality, and ability to provide a satisfactory quality of life for its residents.

Along public and European funds, another source of funding which could be explored is private funds through a public-private partnership. The latter entails a contractual agreement between public and private sector partners to construct, operate, finance, maintain, and/or manage a facility or system. The public sector ensures that residents and taxpayers are best served in the long run while private investment provides the capital needed to build and/or maintain facilities, such as parking facilities, which drives economic development. Such partnerships (PPP) may reduce the public sector's cost burden while also providing much-needed infrastructure. Other benefits associated with PPPs include accelerated project delivery time frames and the creation of economic development benefits and social impacts.

Either of the above identified sources of funding i.e., EU funds, public, and private funds, or a combination thereof could be explored to deliver the proposed Victoria Park, and fund other urban upgrading initiatives in Victoria.

Q. Wouldn't the proposed multi-level car park and the resulting increase in the number of parking spaces incentivize and promote the use of private vehicles?

A. The proposal to develop a multi-level car park underneath the green park is only a part of the overarching vision, and thus it should not be viewed in isolation from the rest of the urban upgrading proposal. Rather than promoting or incentivizing the use of private vehicles, the presented vision aims to foster a gradual transformation towards people centred streets. Having an underground car park would allow the removal of cars parked on the streets, and thus improve the quality and walkability of the streetscape, allowing for better pavements, and thus fostering the concept of shared streets and pedestrianization. This enables people to move freely within the city and make use of the public spaces without needing to use the car.

The underlying principle guiding the presented vision is that of integrating mobility, parking, and public spaces to achieve a transformation towards people centred streets. This entails gradually

shifting from the use of private vehicles towards more sustainable modes of transport. However, this shift cannot be done overnight and should be gradual. The GRDA believes that it would be a mistake to ignore the existing situation and the present parking requirements. In this regard, the underground car park shall be adaptable to future needs such that it can be easily repurposed to meet evolving needs or changing circumstances in the future.

Q. How does the proposal presented in GRDA's vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading impact urban mobility and traffic flow in Victoria?

A. The proposal presented in GRDA's vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading acknowledges the significance of mobility in ensuring the usability of urban areas and presents potential actions to transform the functionality of the existing mobility network and spaces. Its objective is to establish a pathway network that serves both as an urban link between different districts and as a sustainable tourist route, promoting the complete utilization and accessibility of spaces. The proposal aims to challenge the prevailing car-centric hierarchy by prioritizing pedestrians and cyclists, thereby making several streets more accessible to them.

To this end, the proposed increase in the number of parking spaces through an underground multi-level car park, enables certain on-street parking spaces to be restricted, thereby fostering the concept of pedestrianization, and elevating the overall street quality. The proposed removal of parking spaces along the main streets, allows the road width to be reduced and simultaneously pedestrian areas to be widened, thus enhancing the public space experience.

Furthermore, the proposed increase in number of parking spaces should alleviate traffic congestion in the heavily congested zones by curtailing the need for private vehicles to endlessly search for parking in Victoria. Thus, the proposal put forth in GRDA's vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading is expected to positively impact traffic flow.

In this regard, the impact of the proposal on traffic flow should be studied in detail in the subsequent planning and design stages, through a detailed Traffic Impact Assessment. A Traffic Impact Assessment would study traffic flows and density in and around Victoria, thereby identifying any infrastructural upgrade necessary within the approach roads and the ideal parking capacity of the underground car park amongst other factors. Furthermore, a Traffic Impact Assessment along with other scientific studies could assess the role to be exercised by the multi-modal hub facility at Ta' Xħajma in tandem with the proposed underground parking facility in Victoria. Such studies could also help determine whether the proposed multi-level underground car park can serve as a park and ride facility to connect Victoria to other highly frequented areas outside Victoria.

It shall be noted that such studies have not been conducted at this stage given that the proposal put forward is still a preliminary concept. If the proposed concept is endorsed and eventually pursued, these recommended studies and other additional studies which might be requested as part of the development application process would be conducted.

Q. Following the public consultation, what steps will be taken to further develop and implement the proposal?

A. Following the conclusion of the public consultation process, this Feedback Statement report is being published and made available on GRDA's website. This report incorporates all the feedback and recommendations received during the public consultation and demonstrates that appropriate consultation took place in relation to the proposed vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading. The consultation process, which extended over a period of ten weeks, ensured that all interested stakeholders and the affected communities were offered the opportunity to give their views and recommendations, which could potentially be incorporated as part of the final proposal to enhance its benefits.

Based on the feedback outlined in this Feedback Statement report, the initial concept proposed as part of GRDA's vision for Victoria Urban Upgrading would be further developed to draw a sustainable and feasible solution that addresses existing challenges and create a vibrant and inclusive urban environment. In this subsequent proposal development stage, the GRDA would consider incorporating other areas in Victoria, including the public parking at Pjazza l-Assedju ta' Għawdex, as part of the proposal. This subsequent more concrete proposal shall then be presented to the government (Ministry for Gozo) for its consideration.

Considering its complexity and scope, the updated proposal formulated by the GRDA, would require further development and preparatory work prior to implementation, if it is endorsed and pursued by the government. The preparatory phase involves securing funding, detailed planning, preparing detailed designs, securing development permits, and eventually procuring works to carry out the final detailed proposal.

In the detailed design stages, a series of studies and assessments would be conducted to enhance the benefits of the proposal, whilst limiting negative impacts. Some of the most important studies that would be conducted include geological and archaeological studies, and a Traffic Impact Assessment, that along with other considerations, such as the amount of funds secured, would shape the final proposal/project.



GOZO REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Gozo Regional Development Authority
75, Republic Street, Victoria - Gozo, Malta

Tel: +356 2215 6338

Email: info@grda.mt

www.grda.mt