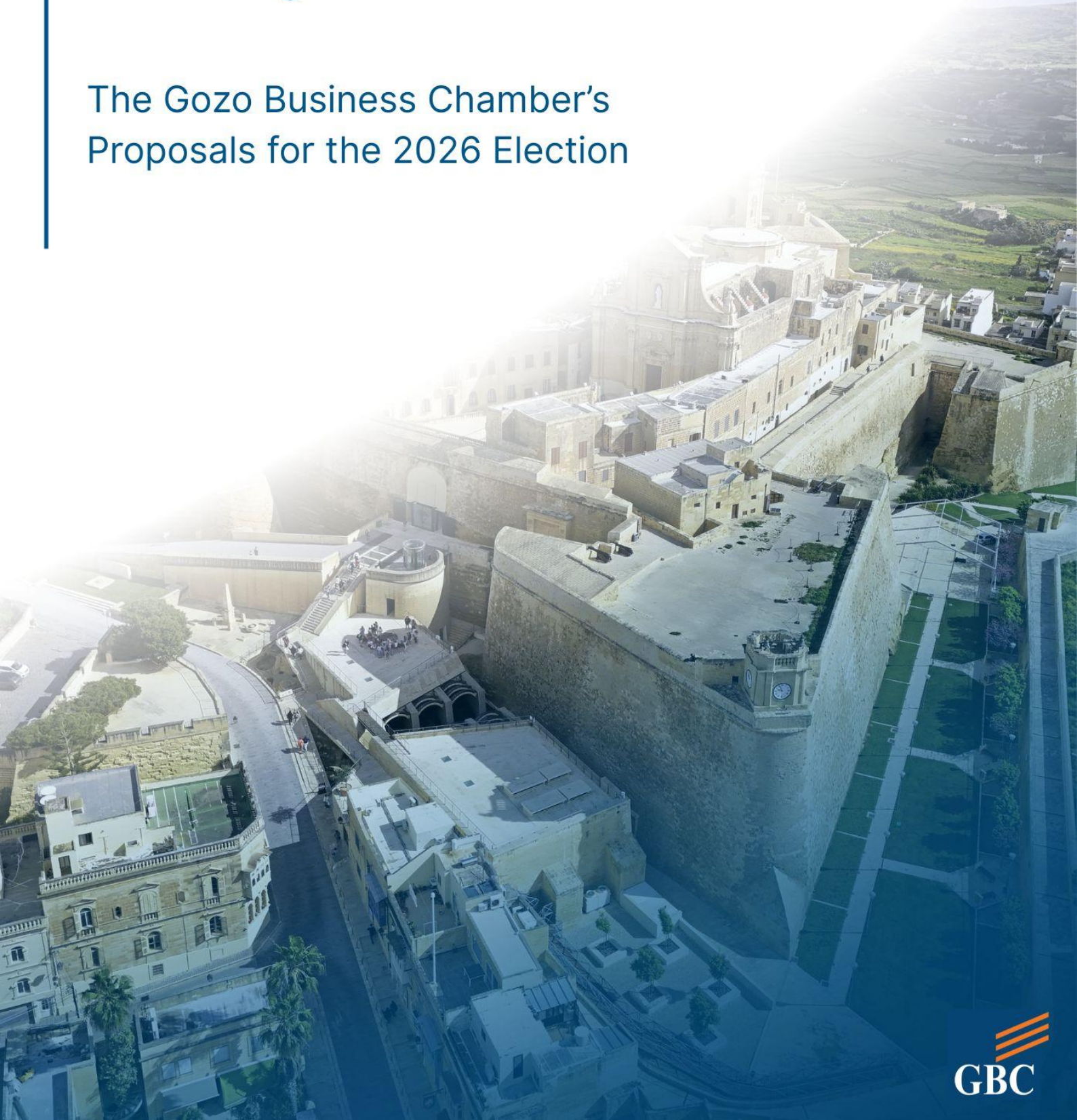


# A Strategic Framework for Gozo's Economic Resilience and Future Development

The Gozo Business Chamber's  
Proposals for the 2026 Election



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THE GOZO BUSINESS CHAMBER

The Brokerage, Santa Marta Street, Victoria, Gozo

Tel: +356 21550305

[www.gozobusinesschamber.org](http://www.gozobusinesschamber.org)

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## **1. Foreword**

The forthcoming elections must not become a contest of who promises the most for the island region of Gozo. Rather, they should mark a decisive shift in how Gozo is perceived and governed: as an autonomous island region which, if placed in the right conditions, can serve as a significant economic contributor to the country.

Autonomy, in this context, does not imply isolation or turning inward. It means establishing a clear and effective governance framework through which Gozo can identify and prioritise its own needs within the national context, with action being focused on these priorities. This should lead to a more efficient and responsive system of decision-making, ensuring that decisions are taken as close as possible to where their impact is felt. Despite the best intentions, centralised structures may not always fully grasp the realities and challenges faced by an island region such as Gozo.

At the international level, recent developments further underline the need for this discussion and action in this area. The European Commission’s decision to consult on a dedicated strategy for European islands highlight further the importance of addressing Gozo’s governance arrangements. Important strategic decisions affecting Gozo will need to be taken in the coming years. While the European framework remains relevant, it is ultimately our responsibility to determine how Gozo is governed and how its interests are best safeguarded.

Against this backdrop, the coming period must focus on a clear and coherent investment plan for Gozo - covering **infrastructure, accessibility, and economic diversification** - while also fostering a **robust ecosystem for youth entrepreneurship and start-ups**. These themes should form the backbone of the national debate on Gozo’s future.

Much has been achieved in recent years, yet it is equally evident that much more remains to be done. Progress in the years ahead will require a clear and sustained commitment from whoever is entrusted with governing the country. Decisions relating to Gozo must be taken through an inclusive process involving Government, Opposition, and the Gozitan community alike, recognising that such decisions will have implications that extend beyond a single legislature. A shared and long-term commitment from all stakeholders is therefore not only desirable, but essential.

## **2. Gozo’s Socio-Economic Situation: A Snapshot**

Gozo’s socio-economic profile reflects the realities of a small island region operating within a centralised national economic and political system. While the island continues to contribute meaningfully to Malta’s overall economic and social fabric, official statistics clearly indicate persistent structural disparities which, if left unaddressed, will continue to constrain Gozo’s development potential.

### **2.1 Population and Demographic Trends**

As at the end of 2022, the **resident population of Gozo and Comino stood at 40,191 persons**, representing approximately **7.0 per cent of Malta’s total population** (NSO, 2024). This population size underlines Gozo’s scale as a distinct island region, while also reinforcing the need for governance and policy responses that are proportionate to its demographic realities.

Gozo’s population profile is characterised by a changing **demographic structure**, a trend that mirrors national patterns. Similarly to Malta, we are seeing an increase in the composition of foreign nationals, when it comes to the working age population. In the 30 to 39 age group, the composition of foreign nationals stood at around 31% (NSO, 2025, p. 17). **This changing demographic structure presents new challenges, but also opportunities.**

### **2.2 Economic Output and Regional Disparities**

From an economic perspective, Gozo and Comino continue to generate a **lower level of economic output** when compared to the Malta region. Regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) data show that, in 2024, Gozo and Comino accounted for approximately **4.3 per cent of national GDP**, despite representing around 7 per cent of the population (NSO, 2025).

More significantly, **GDP per capita for 2024 in Gozo and Comino was estimated at 59.8 per cent of the national average**, highlighting a persistent productivity and income gap between the island region and the mainland (NSO, 2025). This differential is not merely cyclical, but structural in nature, reflecting Gozo’s sectoral composition.

### **2.3 Labour Market Characteristics**

The labour market in Gozo exhibits both resilience and vulnerability. In 2024, **19,554 Gozo and Comino residents were employed on a full-time basis**, representing an increase of **5.9 per cent over the previous year**. Employment remains heavily concentrated in service-based sectors. The concentration of Gozo and Comino residents with a full-time job in the public sector was in the public administration and defence; compulsory social security; education; human health and social work activities, amounting to 79.7 per cent of total public sector. On the other hand, the largest proportion of full-time employed Gozo and Comino residents, in the private sector, worked in the following sectors: wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; transportation and storage; accommodation and food service activities. These accounted for 31.1 per cent of the total private sector on the island (NSO, 2025).

At the same time, labour mobility remains a defining feature of Gozo’s economy. In 2024, **4,935 registered residents of Gozo and Comino were employed full-time in the Malta region** (NSO, 2025), underlining Gozo’s functional integration within the national labour market, but also its continued dependence on inter-island connectivity. This pattern reinforces the importance of accessibility, transport reliability, and cost-effective connectivity as economic enablers rather than mere infrastructural considerations.

### **2.4 Business Activity and Economic Structure**

Business demography statistics further illustrate Gozo’s structural position within the national economy. In **2022**, in the Gozo and Comino region, the **micro (0 - 9) enterprises constituted the largest share (96.5 per cent) of the total active businesses** (NSO, 2024). This reflects a predominance of micro and small enterprises, with a limited presence of higher-value, export-oriented or knowledge-intensive activities.

This economic structure underscores the need for targeted policies aimed at **economic diversification, business scaling**, and the attraction of new sectors that are less constrained by physical insularity and more reliant on digital and human capital.

## **2.5 Tourism and Seasonal Pressures**

Tourism continues to play an important role in Gozo’s economy, though its contribution is marked by certain specific structural limitations. In 2024, Gozo and Comino recorded **401,766 domestic tourist arrivals**, accounting for **90.8 per cent of all domestic tourism trips to the island**, with over **one million domestic tourism nights** registered (NSO, 2026). In **the same year 2,035,607 tourists visited Gozo with only 179,675 staying for one or more nights**, contributing to local economic activity but also highlighting the predominance of short-stay and day-visit patterns (NSO, 2026).

These trends confirm the need for policies that move beyond volume-based tourism and focus instead on **value creation, overnight stays**, and stronger linkages between tourism, cultural heritage, and the wider local economy.

## **2.6 Observations**

Taken together, these indicators paint a clear picture: Gozo’s socio-economic challenges are **structural rather than temporary**. A higher concentration on service-based sectors with lower value added and sectors which intrinsically depend on Gozo’s connectivity, together with a narrow economic base all point towards the need for a more differentiated and place-based policy approach.

Addressing these realities requires more than sector-specific interventions. It calls for a governance framework that recognises Gozo as an island region with distinct socio-economic characteristics, capable of contributing more effectively to the national economy if placed in the right conditions.

## **3. Accessibility: An Integrated Connectivity and Logistics Framework for Gozo**

Gozo’s accessibility challenge should not be treated only as a question of ferry frequency or short-term service improvements. It is a structural issue affecting economic resilience, business continuity, labour mobility, tourism flows, freight reliability, emergency preparedness, and quality of life. As an island within an island, Gozo depends on a limited number of access points, with Mgarr Harbour functioning as the island’s primary maritime gateway and, in practice, its principal

logistics node. The GRDA’s evidence-based review clearly notes that Mġarr simultaneously serves as a passenger terminal, vehicle ferry port and freight logistics node, while also accommodating leisure, fishing, commercial and tourism-related maritime activity (GRDA, 2026, pp. 5-6).

This concentration of functions within one geographically constrained harbour creates a systemic vulnerability. It is not only a transport issue, but an economic and territorial one which impacts the security of supply of both goods and services to Gozo. The GRDA review highlights that structural congestion at Mġarr generates persistent traffic pressures in Għajnsielem and along the Mġarr-Victoria corridor, while passenger and vehicle flows have already exceeded the high-growth projections prepared almost two decades earlier (GRDA, 2026, p. 5). This confirms that the existing model has reached a point where incremental adjustments, while useful, are no longer sufficient.

The Gozo Business Chamber is therefore proposing an **integrated accessibility framework** built around **five mutually reinforcing interventions**:

- the **development of a dedicated logistics hub near the Gozo Rural Airfield**;
- the **extension and future-proofing of Mġarr Harbour**;
- the creation of an **alternative fast ferry landing facility, potentially integrated with the planned Marsalforn breakwater**;
- the **development of a second alternative road link to Mġarr Harbour, preferably through a tunnel**;
- the **retention of the permanent link as a long-term strategic option, including the safeguarding of land already identified or committed for this purpose**.

These interventions should be planned as one strategic system. Their purpose is to separate incompatible flows, reduce pressure on Mġarr, improve resilience, support business competitiveness, and provide Gozo with the infrastructure required for long-term economic diversification.

### **3.2 Logistics hub near the Planned Gozo Rural Airfield**

The Chamber proposes that a dedicated logistics hub be developed in the vicinity of the Gozo Rural Airfield. This location offers strategic advantages because it can serve as a centralised consolidation, distribution and support facility for Gozo, while being **linked directly to Mġarr Harbour through a second access road or tunnel.**

The underlying principle is that port-related logistics should not be concentrated only at the point of maritime arrival. Instead, freight should be managed through a wider logistics system which reduces bottlenecks at the port, improves distribution efficiency, strengthens supply-chain reliability, and supports businesses through more predictable access to goods and supplies. For Gozo, this would mean shifting from a harbour-only logistics model to a port-linked island logistics model.

At present, Mġarr Harbour combines passenger flows, private vehicles, commercial vehicles and freight-related movements within a limited spatial envelope. The 2007 strategic plan had already identified limited operational land, constrained internal circulation, limited water area and inadequate road access as fundamental weaknesses of the port (Fisher Associates, 2007, pp. 13–15). These weaknesses have become more acute with the growth in population, tourism, commuting and economic activity. The GRDA review records substantial increases between 2014 and 2024, including growth in same-day visitors, population, GDP and Gozitan workers commuting to Malta, with passenger traffic through Mġarr reaching 7.4 million movements by the end of 2025 (GRDA, 2026, p. 7).

A **logistics hub** near the rural airfield would therefore **support Gozo in three ways.** First, it would **enable freight to be consolidated, staged and distributed away from the immediate harbour area**, reducing land-side pressure on Mġarr. Secondly, it would **provide a modern base for last-mile distribution within Gozo**, including warehousing, cold-chain facilities, e-commerce fulfilment, and shared logistics services for SMEs. Thirdly, it would **create synergies with the planned Gozo Rural Airfield.**

The logistics hub should not be conceived as large-scale industrial sprawl. It should be **compact, well-regulated, environmentally sensitive, and proportionate to**

**Gozo’s real needs.** Its purpose should be to improve resilience, efficiency and predictability for the island’s business community, while avoiding unnecessary land take.

### **3.3 Extension and future-proofing of Mġarr Harbour**

Mġarr Harbour must remain Gozo’s principal maritime gateway. However, its role needs to be clarified and future proofed. The port should be upgraded to serve the island more efficiently, but it should not continue absorbing every transport, logistics and passenger function without differentiation.

The case for extension has been established for many years. The 2007 Fisher Associates strategic plan concluded that the “do nothing” option was not viable, since it would fail to address the port’s strategic weaknesses and would increasingly suppress Gozo’s economic growth (Fisher Associates, 2007, pp. 14–15). The same report recommended harbour expansion as the preferred strategic development option, noting that it would reduce congestion and queuing, increase port operational land, avoid undesirable internal harbour reclamation in the long term, and generally align with the Gozo Local Plan’s southerly expansion direction (Fisher Associates, 2007, p. 15).

The contemporary evidence strengthens this conclusion. The GRDA review shows that Mġarr is operating under sustained structural pressure, with daily peak demand patterns concentrated between 09:00 and 16:00 and recurring peak points at 10:00 and 16:00 (GRDA, 2026, pp. 8–9). This predictability should be used to inform capacity planning, berth allocation, landside traffic flows and phased investment.

The Chamber therefore proposes that the extension of Mġarr Harbour should include **additional operational land and marshalling capacity, improved segregation of passenger and freight flows, better facilities for commercial vehicles and essential supplies, cleaner ferry infrastructure, improved public transport integration, and enhanced resilience for peak travel and disruptions.**

This is also consistent with Malta Vision 2050, which places Gozo within the national long-term development framework and identifies the need for smart land and sea

usage, improved mobility, and infrastructure that supports territorial balance and resilience (Government of Malta, 2026, pp. 148–155).

### **3.4 Alternative fast ferry landing facility at Marsalforn**

The Chamber also proposes that Gozo should develop an alternative fast ferry landing facility, potentially integrated with the planned Marsalforn breakwater. This would not replace Mġarr Harbour. Rather, it would diversify access, improve service resilience, and reduce pressure on Mġarr by separating foot-passenger fast ferry flows from the vehicle ferry system.

Marsalforn offers a strategic opportunity because of the planned breakwater intervention. If designed from the outset with transport integration in mind, the breakwater project could support not only coastal protection and regeneration, but also an alternative maritime access point for fast ferry services. It would also reduce unnecessary land-side pressure on the Mġarr–Victoria corridor.

The proposal should be subject to technical, environmental and navigational studies. However, the principle is clear: Gozo requires more than one maritime access point. Mġarr should remain the main vehicle and freight gateway, while Marsalforn could become a complementary passenger-focused maritime node. This would introduce redundancy into Gozo’s accessibility system, which is essential for an island economy exposed to weather disruption, and concentrated infrastructure risk.

### **3.5 Second alternative road to Mġarr, preferably through a tunnel**

The fourth component is the development of a second road link to Mġarr Harbour, preferably through a tunnel. This is a critical element of the integrated proposal. Without a second access route, both the extension of Mġarr Harbour and the proposed logistics hub would remain constrained by the same vulnerability: dependence on one main road corridor.

The 2007 Fisher Associates report already identified the single two-lane access road to Mġarr as a major weakness, noting that all vehicles using the port had to use the same route, causing severe congestion at peak ferry times (Fisher Associates, 2007, pp. 20, 23–25). The report also warned that if the road were

blocked by an accident or other incident, port operations would be seriously interrupted (Fisher Associates, 2007, p. 24).

A tunnel-based road link would offer several advantages over surface-based widening alone. It could reduce land take, avoid further pressure on sensitive areas, improve journey reliability, and provide a direct strategic connection between Mġarr Harbour and the proposed logistics hub near the planned rural airfield. This would also allow freight movements to be channelled more efficiently, reducing the need for heavy vehicles to pass through village cores and congested approach roads.

The second access route should therefore be designed not merely as an emergency road, but as a resilience corridor. Its role would be to provide redundancy if the existing Mġarr road is blocked, support the extended harbour, connect Mġarr directly to the logistics hub, reduce freight pressure on existing roads, and improve emergency response and operational continuity.

### **3.6 Permanent link as a long-term strategic option**

While the permanent link between Malta and Gozo does not currently appear to be central to the electoral policy agenda of the main political parties, the Chamber believes that this option should not be discarded from Gozo’s long-term strategic framework. The issue should not be reduced to whether the project is implemented in the immediate legislature. Rather, it should be recognised as a long-term national infrastructure option which may become necessary considering future demographic, economic, climate-related and connectivity pressures.

The Chamber’s position has consistently been that Gozo’s connectivity requires long-term strategic thinking, rather than short-term project-by-project decision-making. In recent public comments, the Chamber’s CEO underlined the need for a long-term strategic vision for Gozo, particularly in relation to infrastructure, accessibility, economic diversification and the island’s future development model. Earlier commentary by the Chamber also argued that connectivity remains vital for Gozo’s success and that a sub-sea tunnel would provide security and reliability for commuters, businesses and the wider island economy.

The Chamber also notes that severe weather events continue to expose Gozo’s vulnerability when maritime connectivity is disrupted. The Chamber has recently sought to re-open the debate on a permanent link precisely because Gozo’s isolation during storm events demonstrates the risks of relying exclusively on sea-based access.

For this reason, land that had already been identified, committed or safeguarded for the permanent link should be retained for that purpose and should not be released for incompatible development. Safeguarding this land does not oblige immediate implementation of the project. Rather, it preserves Malta and Gozo’s strategic options. Once such land is lost to other development, the country may irreversibly compromise its ability to deliver a fixed link in the future, should the economic, environmental and technical issues and scenarios require and permit it.

The permanent link should therefore remain part of the wider accessibility discussion, alongside investment in Mġarr Harbour, alternative ferry landing facilities, improved maritime services, the logistics hub, and better internal road connectivity. These are not mutually exclusive solutions. Gozo’s accessibility needs require a layered resilience model, where maritime, road, logistics and potentially fixed-link infrastructure are planned together over the long term.

### **3.7 Integrated impact**

The strength of this proposal lies in the fact that each component supports the others. The logistics hub reduces pressure on Mġarr by relocating distribution and freight-management functions away from the harbour. The harbour extension improves maritime capacity and operational resilience. The Marsalforn fast ferry landing diversifies passenger access and reduces dependence on a single gateway. The tunnel or second road link connects the system together and prevents the harbour from remaining dependent on one vulnerable road corridor. The safeguarding of the permanent link preserves Gozo’s long-term strategic options.

For the Gozo Business Chamber, accessibility is not only about mobility. It is about whether businesses can operate reliably, whether workers can commute efficiently, whether visitors can reach Gozo sustainably, whether essential goods

can arrive without disruption, and whether the island can compete on fairer terms despite its double insularity.

The Chamber is therefore proposing that Government commits to a **Gozo Integrated Accessibility and Logistics Masterplan**, including feasibility, environmental, engineering and economic studies for the components outlined above. This masterplan should be developed with clear timelines, stakeholder consultation, and phased implementation, ensuring that Gozo’s connectivity infrastructure is planned as one coherent system.

### **3.8 Proposed electoral commitment**

The Gozo Business Chamber calls for the next legislature to commit to the preparation and implementation of a Gozo Integrated Accessibility and Logistics Masterplan, built around the development of a **logistics hub near the Gozo Rural Airfield**, the **extension and future-proofing of Mġarr Harbour**, the creation of an **alternative fast ferry landing facility at Marsalforn**, and the **construction of a second alternative road link to Mġarr Harbour**, preferably through a tunnel. The Chamber further calls for **the permanent link between Malta and Gozo to remain safeguarded as a long-term strategic option**, including the retention of land already identified or committed for this purpose. This integrated package should strengthen Gozo’s resilience, reduce pressure on the existing Mġarr corridor, improve freight and passenger flows, and provide the infrastructure required for sustainable economic growth.

## **4. Economic Diversification: An Integrated Island Innovation, Enterprise and Startup Ecosystem Framework for Gozo**

Gozo’s long-term economic development should no longer be treated simply as a matter of increasing activity within existing sectors. While accessibility remains a central condition for Gozo’s economic performance, the Chamber has consistently identified **diversification as the next major structural challenge for the island**.

Gozo’s economy remains structurally narrow. It continues to depend heavily on tourism, public-sector employment, construction-related activity and a microenterprise-based private sector, while higher value-added sectors such as

information and communication, professional services, financial services, digital services and knowledge-based activities remain limited in their contribution to the regional economy.

This gap in Gozo’s Gross Domestic Product, referred to in the analysis of Gozo’s Socio-Economic Situation, is not merely statistical. It reflects deeper structural realities: limited high-value employment opportunities, youth migration to Malta, a weaker presence of knowledge-based sectors, and a continued reliance on sectors that are labour-intensive and which have a significant impact on Gozo’s physical and geographic realities.

The policy challenge is therefore not only to generate more economic activity, but to generate a different type of economic activity. Gozo requires growth that is higher value-added, less dependent on land consumption, more attractive to younger workers, more export-oriented, and better aligned with Malta’s long-term strategic direction.

This approach is consistent with Malta Vision 2050, which identifies sustainable economic growth as one of the country’s main pillars and frames future growth around innovation-led prosperity, productivity, competitiveness and quality of life. The Vision also states that Malta’s long-term economic model should be quality-driven and productivity-led, rather than based on a static continuation of past growth patterns (Government of Malta, 2026, pp. 83–89).

For Gozo, this requires a differentiated, place-based approach. Its double insularity, smaller labour market, strong community networks, quality-of-life proposition, improving digital infrastructure, existing public assets and early-stage innovation environment create both disadvantages and opportunities. The Chamber’s central position is therefore that Gozo should be developed as an island hub for innovation, investment, enterprise and startups, using the Gozo Innovation Hub as the main operational anchor.

The Gozo Business Chamber is therefore proposing an integrated economy, and diversification framework built around nine mutually reinforcing interventions:

1. the **formal designation of Gozo as an Island Hub for Innovation, Investment and Startups;**

2. the **transformation of the Gozo Innovation Hub into the anchor of Gozo’s enterprise and startup ecosystem;**
3. the **development of a structured startup ecosystem focused on selected priority areas;**
4. **a new governance and delivery model for the Gozo Innovation Hub and the wider ecosystem;**
5. an **integrated Gozo Enterprise One-Stop Hub;**
6. a **stronger education, skills and entrepreneurship pipeline;**
7. **active attraction of external startups, skilled professionals, digital nomads and international partners;**
8. **stronger support for business internationalisation and market access;**
9. a **transport assistance scheme for wholesalers, importers and retailers.**

These interventions should be planned as one coherent economic development package. Their purpose is to activate existing infrastructure, retain young talent, attract higher-value activity, support start-ups and scale-ups, strengthen existing businesses, reduce structural disadvantages, and create a clearer investment narrative for Gozo.

#### **4.1 Gozo as an Island Hub for Innovation, Investment and Startups**

The Chamber proposes that Gozo should be formally designated as an Island Hub for Innovation, Investment and Startups. This designation should recognise Gozo’s specific economic, geographic and demographic realities, while positioning the island as a strategic opportunity within Malta’s wider economic transformation.

This designation should not be understood as a compensatory measure. It should be framed as a strategic economic policy. Gozo’s small scale, island identity, community proximity, quality-of-life proposition and improving digital infrastructure can become strengths if they are deliberately used to attract specific forms of investment and enterprise activity.

The designation should be supported by a clear policy package. This should include targeted fiscal incentives for enterprises choosing to establish or expand operations in Gozo, simplified and faster regulatory processes for eligible investment projects, specific investment support through the Gozo Innovation Hub, dedicated startup support, and a focus on strategic sectors where Gozo can realistically build a niche.

The sectors should not be chosen simply because they are fashionable. They should be selected through a structured assessment of Gozo’s real advantages, infrastructure readiness, talent availability, market access, regulatory requirements and potential for critical mass. A targeted approach is essential. Gozo should not attempt to replicate larger innovation hubs, nor should it attempt to develop too many sectors simultaneously. Its strategy should focus on areas where the island can offer a specific value proposition.

Priority areas may include digital services, AI-enabled business solutions, cybersecurity, digital media, green technologies, medtech and health-related innovation, unmanned aerial vehicle applications, specialised aviation-related services, applied education, executive training, and selected research-linked activities. These areas should be developed selectively, based on evidence and feasibility, rather than broad aspiration.

The designation of Gozo as an Island Hub for Innovation, Investment and Startups would provide a clear framework through which existing infrastructure, national incentives, EU policy instruments and private-sector initiative can be aligned.

#### **4.2 The Gozo Innovation Hub as the anchor of the ecosystem**

The Gozo Innovation Hub should become the central operational instrument for Gozo’s diversification strategy. It should not function merely as a physical premises, but as the platform through which the island hub and startup ecosystem model is delivered.

The Chamber’s Budget 2026 document already proposes that the Hub should be reconfigured into modular offices and hot-desking stations, rebranded as a vibrant Tech and Business Hub, and linked more directly with DIHub.mt and the Malta Digital Innovation Authority. It also proposes that dedicated space should be

allocated for start-ups and that certain start-ups should be directed towards Gozo (Gozo Business Chamber, 2025, p. 10).

This transformation is necessary because infrastructure alone does not create an ecosystem. The Hub should become a home for start-ups and scale-ups, a landing point for targeted investors, a workspace for digital, green and knowledge-based businesses, a platform for collaboration between government, business, education providers and entrepreneurs, and a visible symbol of Gozo’s economic diversification strategy.

The Hub should be repositioned as a structured entry point into Gozo’s startup ecosystem. Its primary function should be to support student-led initiatives, graduate founders, early-stage startups, research collaborations, innovation-oriented SMEs, digital nomads, remote teams and small technology firms. This requires a shift from a real estate model to an ecosystem model.

The **pricing and access model should also reflect Gozo’s stage of ecosystem development.** Early-stage firms and student-led ventures are highly cost-sensitive. A revised model should therefore include subsidised or zero-cost access during the initial startup phase, shared workspaces, hot-desking, short-term project space, flexible lease arrangements, and phased pricing as companies grow.

The Hub should also be **actively programmed. This means regular networking events, mentoring sessions, investor meetings, sector-specific workshops, innovation challenges, demo days, business support clinics, links with educational institutions and collaboration with national enterprise and innovation agencies.** The objective should be to create a living business community rather than an underutilised facility.

A further strategic possibility is for part of the Hub to be allocated to a specialised training centre, applied research institute or international education partner. Such a presence would strengthen the link between research, talent development, business formation and inward investment. It would also help increase Gozo’s visibility as a credible location for knowledge-based activity.

### **4.3 Developing a structured startup ecosystem**

Gozo’s diversification strategy should include **the deliberate development of a startup ecosystem. This is important because startups can address the structural mismatch between Gozo’s educational outcomes and its local employment opportunities.**

Each year, Gozitan students complete tertiary education in fields such as ICT, business, finance, economics, engineering, digital media, design, data-related disciplines and other professional areas. However, many do not see Gozo as a realistic location in which to build their careers. Employment in Malta often becomes the default option. This contributes to a persistent talent retention challenge: Gozo helps develop skilled individuals but does not fully benefit from their knowledge and capabilities.

A structured startup ecosystem can help address this challenge by making entrepreneurship and innovation-driven employment more viable in Gozo. It can create graduate-level roles, support founders, enable skilled individuals to work locally while serving national and international markets, and strengthen the island’s ability to retain and attract talent.

The **development of this ecosystem should include mentoring, incubation, acceleration, digitalisation support, early-stage funding, technical support, investor access and structured follow-up after entrepreneurship initiatives.** Existing initiatives such as **Youth4Entrepreneurship Gozo should evolve from standalone competition into a pre-incubation and early-stage development pipeline.** This would allow promising ideas to receive mentoring, technical guidance, modest seed support and access to the Gozo Innovation Hub after the competition stage.

Gozo should also develop locally branded startup initiatives, including innovation forums, sector-specific workshops, flagship ecosystem events, curated networking programmes and founder support activities. These should be designed to give Gozo a recognisable identity within Malta’s and Europe’s startup landscape.

#### **4.4 A new governance and delivery model**

The Gozo Innovation Hub and the wider startup ecosystem require a governance model that is flexible, entrepreneurial and mission driven. A purely administrative or property-management approach risks leaving the Hub disconnected from the needs of entrepreneurs, investors, students and growing firms.

Government should retain ownership of the physical asset, safeguarding public investment and ensuring alignment with national economic priorities. However, **the Hub should be supported by an independent, business-oriented governance structure involving representatives from the private sector, innovation actors, educational institutions and relevant public entities.** The private-sector component should include individuals with experience in technology, green-tech, digital services, creative industries, innovation, investment, startup development and enterprise growth.

This governance structure should be responsible for setting the Hub’s strategic direction, overseeing performance and accountability, supporting tenant attraction, curating the Hub around complementary sectors, reinvesting any surplus into facilities and tenant support, leveraging networks for mentorship and investment, and reporting regularly to Government and relevant stakeholders.

**A wider ecosystem coordination mechanism should also be established.** Gozo’s startup ecosystem will depend on collaboration between the Gozo Regional Development Authority, Malta Enterprise, educational institutions, the Gozo Innovation Hub, the Gozo Business Chamber, student organisations, investors, national innovation bodies and private operators. Without structured coordination, initiatives risk remaining fragmented.

The governance model should therefore include regular coordination meetings, thematic working groups, joint pilot projects, periodic ecosystem reviews, shared key performance indicators and clear institutional responsibilities. This would ensure that education, incentives, infrastructure, investment promotion and enterprise support are aligned towards common objectives.

The **Hub and ecosystem should also be guided by a five-year strategic framework.** This framework should identify Gozo’s priority sectors, define the

Hub’s mission, establish flexible letting arrangements, provide for professional management, include measurable targets, and set timelines for implementation. Targets should include occupancy, startups supported, jobs created, graduate founders assisted, mentoring hours delivered, partnerships formed, investment attracted and firms supported to reach external markets.

#### **4.5 An integrated Gozo Enterprise One-Stop Hub**

A core part of the island hub model should be the **creation of an integrated Gozo Enterprise One-Stop Hub located at the Gozo Innovation Hub.**

The Chamber’s Budget 2026 document proposes that Gozo-based business support offices should be empowered so that entities such as for example Malta Enterprise, the Malta Business Registry, and the Malta Financial Services Authority offices in Gozo can take direct decisions on approvals and incentives. It further proposes that these entities should be housed under a unified Gozo Enterprise One-Stop Hub at the Gozo Innovation Hub (Gozo Business Chamber, 2025, p. 11).

This would reduce administrative fragmentation and give Gozo-based businesses a clearer route to support. The One-Stop Hub should provide guidance on company formation, investment incentives, business grants, regulatory requirements, digital and innovation support, access to finance, internationalisation, startup support and liaison with national authorities.

The One-Stop Hub should not be limited to signposting. Its purpose should be to bring decision-making closer to Gozo. Where possible, Gozo-based offices should be empowered to process, recommend or approve relevant schemes and support measures directly.

This is particularly important for start-ups, microenterprises and small businesses, which often lack the time and administrative capacity to navigate multiple institutions. It would also strengthen the Gozo Innovation Hub as the main interface between Gozo’s business community and the national enterprise support system.

The **Malta Development Bank** should also have **a stronger role in Gozo through targeted financing instruments aligned with the needs of Gozo-based**

**enterprises**, particularly startups, microenterprises and firms seeking to scale beyond the local market.

#### **4.6 Education, skills and entrepreneurship pipeline**

Education and skills development must be central to Gozo’s diversification strategy. The objective should not be only to train workers for existing jobs, but to shape a culture in which entrepreneurship, innovation and international market participation are seen as realistic career pathways.

**Entrepreneurship should be introduced from an early stage as a credible and socially valued option.** Students should be exposed to role models, practical business experiences, innovation challenges and real examples of how skills can be used locally while operating internationally. This is particularly important in Gozo, where young people often assume that professional opportunity requires relocation.

**Financial literacy should form part of this approach.** Understanding budgeting, investment, taxation, risk and business economics can make entrepreneurship less abstract and less intimidating. This should be complemented by project-based learning, innovation challenges linked to Gozo-specific problems, direct exposure to entrepreneurs, and collaboration with local businesses and the Gozo Innovation Hub.

At tertiary level, stronger links are needed between education, industry and entrepreneurship. The University of Malta, MCAST and other institutions should expand internships, project-based collaborations, entrepreneurship modules, interdisciplinary programmes and applied learning opportunities linked to Gozo’s priority sectors.

MCAST Gozo and other providers should also be supported to develop micro-credentials, short programmes and specialised training aligned with areas such as ICT, AI, digital services, renewable energy, tourism technologies, agri-tech, cybersecurity and entrepreneurship. These programmes should be designed in consultation with employers and ecosystem actors.

Student organisations also have an important role. They can communicate student perspectives to policymakers, help disseminate opportunities, and act as a bridge between young people, business organisations and public institutions. The aim should be to build a coherent talent pipeline linking early education, tertiary education, informal learning, entrepreneurship support and the Gozo Innovation Hub.

#### **4.7 Attracting external startups, talent and digital nomads**

Gozo’s startup ecosystem should not rely only on locally generated activity. Attracting external startups, skilled professionals, digital nomads, experienced founders and international partners can accelerate ecosystem development, increase knowledge transfer and strengthen international connections.

Gozo already offers a strong quality-of-life proposition: safety, community cohesion, environmental attractiveness, shorter distances and a distinctive island identity. However, these advantages must be combined with reliable infrastructure, flexible workspaces, administrative support, housing options, schooling, transport connectivity and access to professional services.

Attraction policies should therefore be developed as a coherent value proposition rather than as isolated incentives. Gozo could be positioned as a specialised innovation-friendly island environment offering strong digital connectivity, a high quality of life, flexible workspace, targeted incentives, simplified administrative processes and access to both the Maltese and EU markets.

Digital nomads should also be treated as part of the innovation ecosystem rather than only as an extension of tourism. Many remote professionals possess skills in entrepreneurship, software development, design, finance, digital marketing and other knowledge-based fields. If properly integrated into local events, mentoring networks and collaborative projects, they can contribute to knowledge transfer and ecosystem density.

**Consideration should also be given to calibrated fiscal, residency and work-permit tools to attract high-value founders, skilled employees and non-EU specialists to Gozo.** Such measures should be designed carefully to ensure that

they attract high-value activity and complement local talent development rather than displacing it.

This should include exploring differentiated thresholds for Gozo under relevant highly skilled individual schemes, streamlined residency procedures for non-EU founders and skilled employees relocating to Gozo, multi-year permits linked to continued economic activity, family inclusion, and pathways for international students in priority sectors to remain and work in Gozo after completing their studies.

The objective is not to attract low-cost labour. It is to attract entrepreneurs, specialists and knowledge workers capable of creating skilled employment, transferring knowledge, supporting local graduates and linking Gozo to international markets. These measures are also important, as they act as an incentive to attract foreign talent in the context of the struggle of local businesses to find enough local workers in specialist fields.

#### **4.8 Business internationalisation and market access**

Gozo’s internal market is small. Any serious diversification strategy must therefore support Gozo-based businesses to reach clients, investors and partners beyond the island.

The Chamber’s Budget 2026 document proposes specific incentives to encourage Gozitan companies to participate in foreign trade fairs. It also proposes the establishment of a Valletta-based “Gozo Showcase” meeting space to facilitate networking with potential investors and clients (Gozo Business Chamber, 2025, p. 10).

This proposal should form part of the wider island hub strategy. It would help Gozo-based operators overcome the limitations of scale and visibility by giving them structured access to wider markets. Support should include participation in international trade fairs, business-to-business matchmaking, investor meetings, export-readiness preparation, market-entry guidance and the use of a Malta-based showcase or meeting facility for Gozo-based operators.

A Gozo Showcase Office in Malta would also serve as an extension of the Gozo Innovation Hub. Even when operations are based in Gozo, companies often need to meet clients, investors, regulators and partners in Malta. A professional meeting and representation space would help Gozo-based firms operate more effectively without relocating their core activities.

This is particularly relevant for digital services, specialist manufacturing, food and beverage, creative industries, tourism-related services and other niche sectors that cannot rely solely on Gozo’s internal market.

#### **4.9 Transport-cost equity for existing businesses**

The creation of an innovation and investment hub must be accompanied by measures that protect the competitiveness of Gozo’s existing commercial base. Economic diversification should not be interpreted as a shift away from existing businesses. It should strengthen the overall economy by supporting both new sectors and established operators.

The Chamber’s proposal for a **transport scheme for wholesalers, importers and retailers remains directly relevant**. The proposal identifies three cost pressures affecting Gozo-based firms: higher labour costs, higher raw material costs and added transportation costs. It emphasises that transport is one of the most important cost components for Gozo-based companies (Gozo Business Chamber, 2023, p. 2).

The proposal also notes that, in the Chamber’s business sentiment surveys of August 2022 and February 2023, 15.1% and 27.7% respectively of respondents identified accessibility between the two islands as one of the main issues hindering their operations. It further highlights that waiting time, particularly at the Ċirkewwa Terminal, represents unproductive time which still has to be paid by businesses (Gozo Business Chamber, 2023, p. 2).

The commercial context has also changed. The proposal explains that the traditional model of the Gozitan sole distributor has declined, while more Gozo-based companies are now importing directly from abroad and distributing products across the Maltese territory. This creates opportunities but also places Gozo-based firms at a disadvantage because additional transport costs reduce

their profit margins when compared to Malta-based competitors (Gozo Business Chamber, 2023, p. 3).

The **Chamber therefore proposes that a scheme similar to the Malta Enterprise Gozo Transport Grant for the manufacturing sector should also be made available to the wholesale, import and retail sectors.** The proposal specifies that checks should be carried out with the relevant entities administering similar schemes so that the same entity does not benefit twice for the same eligible costs (Gozo Business Chamber, 2023, p. 5).

This measure should be understood as a competitiveness and equity measure. It does not replace the innovation hub proposal but complements it. Existing businesses must remain viable and competitive if Gozo is to build a broader and more resilient economy.

#### **4.10 Integrated impact**

The strength of this proposal lies in the fact that each component supports the others. The designation of Gozo as an Island Hub for Innovation, Investment and Startups creates the strategic identity. The Gozo Innovation Hub provides the physical and operational anchor. The startup ecosystem provides the pipeline for new enterprise formation. The governance model provides coordination and accountability. The Gozo Enterprise One-Stop Hub brings support services closer to businesses. The education and skills pipeline supports talent retention. External startup and talent attraction increases ecosystem density. Internationalisation measures help Gozo-based firms reach beyond the island. Transport assistance protects existing commercial operators from structural cost disadvantages.

Together, these measures would create a more coherent and credible economic development model for Gozo. They would reposition Gozo as a designated island hub for innovation and investment, transform the Gozo Innovation Hub from an underutilised asset into an active economic development platform, create a structured startup pipeline, introduce a governance model capable of attracting tenants and supporting founders, create a clearer investment narrative, improve business support services, strengthen market access opportunities, and support existing commercial operators through targeted transport assistance.

The wider impact would be both economic and social. A more diversified Gozo would offer stronger career pathways for young people, reduce dependence on commuting and seasonal sectors, create a more attractive environment for private investment, and strengthen the island’s ability to retain and attract talent. It would also reduce pressure on land-intensive sectors by shifting part of Gozo’s growth model towards digital, knowledge-based, research-driven and innovation-oriented activity.

This approach also aligns with Malta Vision 2050’s emphasis on targeted transformation, productivity, innovation, sustainability and a broader economic base. The Vision recognises that Malta must deepen economic diversification while avoiding excessive reliance on scale, labour intensity and land consumption (Government of Malta, 2026, pp. 88–89). It also presents a balanced model in which high-growth sectors pull the economy forward while foundational sectors remain viable, competitive and socially relevant (Government of Malta, 2026, pp. 112–114).

For Gozo, this balance is essential. The island cannot rely only on attracting new sectors while existing businesses face structural cost disadvantages. Nor can it rely only on protecting existing sectors without creating new opportunities for younger workers and higher-value enterprise. The Chamber’s proposal therefore brings together both dimensions: economic transformation and economic resilience.

#### **4.11 Proposed electoral commitment**

The Gozo Business Chamber calls for the next legislature to formally designate Gozo as an Island Hub for Innovation, Investment and Startups, anchored in a reformed and actively managed Gozo Innovation Hub. This should be supported by targeted incentives, a new governance and delivery model, a five-year strategic framework, an integrated Gozo Enterprise One-Stop Hub, a structured startup ecosystem, stronger education and skills pathways, attraction measures for high-value startups and talent, support for business internationalisation, and a transport assistance scheme for wholesalers, importers and retailers.

This integrated package should aim to diversify Gozo’s economy, retain young talent, support existing businesses, attract higher-value investment, create graduate-level employment, strengthen entrepreneurship, and position Gozo as a

strategic island economy within Malta’s long-term development model. Moreover, these proposals, must not be seen as a vacuum. These, together with the Chamber’s proposals, on an integrated connectivity and logistics framework for the island, including key proposals such as the logistics hub, must be seen as complementary to each other.

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

Gozo stands at an important point in its economic and social development. The evidence set out in this document shows that the island’s challenges are not temporary or isolated. They are structural in nature and require a coherent, long-term and place-based policy response.

The Gozo Business Chamber believes that the forthcoming electoral period should therefore be used to move beyond fragmented proposals and short-term interventions. Gozo requires a strategic framework that recognises its realities as an island region and places governance, accessibility, logistics, economic diversification, enterprise development, youth opportunity and institutional responsiveness at the centre of national policy.

As highlighted in the Foreword to this document, this also requires a mature national discussion on Gozo’s governance model. The Chamber believes that clear steps should be taken towards greater regional autonomy for Gozo. This should not be understood as isolation, separation, or inward-looking policy. Rather, it should mean a stronger and more effective governance framework through which Gozo can identify its own priorities, shape policy responses more directly, and ensure that decisions are taken as close as possible to the communities and businesses affected by them.

Such a shift would allow Gozo’s development to be approached in a more coordinated and accountable manner. It would strengthen the island’s ability to plan ahead, align public investment with its specific needs, and ensure that national policy is implemented in a way that reflects Gozo’s demographic, economic, geographic and social realities.

The proposals outlined in this document are not standalone measures. They are interconnected elements of one development model. Investment in accessibility and logistics is necessary to strengthen Gozo’s resilience, reduce structural disadvantages and support the day-to-day operations of businesses and workers. At the same time, economic diversification is necessary to create new opportunities, retain young talent, attract higher-value investment and reduce overdependence on a narrow economic base.

For this reason, the Chamber is calling for three clear commitments in the next legislature. First, **clear and measurable steps towards a more autonomous regional governance framework for Gozo**. Secondly, the preparation and implementation of **a Gozo Integrated Accessibility and Logistics Masterplan**, bringing together the future of Mgarr Harbour, a logistics hub, alternative maritime access, improved road connectivity and the safeguarding of long-term strategic options. Thirdly, **the formal designation of Gozo as an Island Hub for Innovation, Investment and Startups, anchored in a reformed Gozo Innovation Hub and supported by a stronger enterprise, skills and start-up ecosystem**.

These proposals should not be viewed simply as sectoral requests. They represent a broader call for Gozo to be treated as a strategic island region capable of contributing more effectively to Malta’s development if provided with the right governance structures, infrastructure, incentives and institutional support.

The Chamber also emphasises that Gozo’s future cannot be shaped through one legislature alone. The decisions required in the coming years involve governance, infrastructure, land use, economic transformation, skills, investment and institutional reform. These are long-term choices which must be approached with responsibility, continuity and broad political maturity. They should be developed through meaningful consultation with the Gozitan community, the business sector, civil society, Government, Opposition and relevant public institutions. The fact that this also comes at a point where the Gozo Regional Development Strategy will also be reviewed, highlights the need for serious discussion on these important issues.

Ultimately, the objective is not merely to address Gozo’s disadvantages, but to unlock its potential. Gozo can be more than a peripheral region dependent on

compensatory measures. It can become a resilient, innovative and attractive island economy, capable of offering stronger opportunities to its people while contributing more substantially to the national economy.

The Gozo Business Chamber therefore urges all political parties and policymakers to place Gozo’s long-term sustainable development at the centre of the national debate. The island requires a clear vision, a stronger regional voice, a credible implementation plan, and a sustained commitment to ensure that its economic future is built on resilience, diversification, accessibility, innovation, quality of life and a governance model that reflects Gozo’s distinct island reality.

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