

NORTH

REGIONAL CULTURAL STRATEGY

2022-2027



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Forewords

Hon. Owen Bonnici

Minister for The National Heritage, The Arts and Local Government



The project *Provision of Cultural Strategy Development and Implementation to Local Councils and Regional Councils* led by Arts Council Malta in collaboration with the Local Government Division and the Local Councils' Association is another milestone for cultural development in Malta. I am proud to note that this project was successfully implemented as part of the project *Create 2020* with an investment of EUR1 million in cultural and creative capacity skills in Malta's public sector, through the *European Structural and Investment Funds 2014 – 2020*.

The Regional Cultural Strategies are another step towards the government's commitment to further decentralise cultural activity and empower more local communities to lead cultural development. They also build on the outstanding collaboration between institutions within the Ministry for The National Heritage, The Arts and Local Government, with the valid contributions of cultural experts and hundreds of stakeholders who participated in the process.

Culture is an important and legally binding remit for both Local and Regional Councils, and this was reinforced further in the recent 2019 reform. Designed hand in hand with Local and Regional Councils, both the process leading up to the formulation of these Regional Cultural Strategies and the tools in place for their implementation are tangible examples of participatory governance. As a result, the Regional Councils are now able to identify cultural priorities which are evidence-based and adapted to the unique cultural identities on a local, regional and national level.

These Regional Cultural Strategies will also facilitate and improve the resource management

of local cultural infrastructure, thereby increasing opportunities for the cultural and creative sectors, and making them more accessible. I am confident that the training given to all Local Councils and Regional Councils will support the administrative structures of Local Government to implement the Regional Cultural Strategies. This government remains committed to support Regional Councils and their collaborators to implement these strategies as we firmly believe that culture is an essential component for the wellbeing of our communities.

I encourage the Regional Councils to collaborate wholeheartedly with Arts Council Malta and translate this strategy into tangible, effective and sustainable actions that positively impact Local Councils, NGOs, creative practitioners and other stakeholders involved in the cultural and creative sectors. The wealth of our cultural heritage, the diversity of our communities and the exceptional talent of our people are assets for the sustainability of our Regions. Together, we can ensure that talent development, audience development and heritage innovation, established as the three transversal themes of these strategies, will lead to more collaborative and community-led cultural development in Malta and Gozo.



Hon. Alison Zerafa Civelli

Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government

Despite our diminutive size, Malta has a lot to offer its residents and visitors. Our towns and villages are truly unique as they are rich in culture and heritage and surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea. This is why our Regional and Local Councils are acutely aware of the importance we must place on protecting and nurturing our local culture, heritage and traditions as together they make up the heart of our cities and villages, our environment, and our entire archipelago.

In adding value to Malta's localities, we want to optimise and elevate our local expertise and encourage our Local Councils to use their talents and knowledge to reinforce our local history, traditions and customs. In this manner, we can preserve what makes us Maltese and pass it on to future generations for years to come.

Our Local Councils are a great source of regional knowledge, which is why they form an integral part of the National Cultural Policy. Only with their participation can we adapt to the everyday realities of Malta's six regions to integrate communities, the church, committees, organisations, artists, creatives, local clubs and residents to jointly promote and stimulate our shared culture, traditions and history.

For this reason, I am delighted to announce that Malta's Ministry for The National Heritage, The Arts and Local Government is investing in Regional Managers within our Regional Councils as a vital human resource. What's more, they are also collaborating closely with the Regional Cultural Coordinator from Arts Council Malta.

I look ahead with excitement at the thought of witnessing local cultural activities and initiatives of

high quality, facilitated by our Local Councils. Most of all, I encourage our residents and communities to participate and take the opportunity to learn from such experiences and embrace our local talent and the history and heritage that make us truly Maltese.

Albert Marshall,
Executive Chair, Arts Council Malta



It has been quite an insightful process for Arts Council Malta (ACM), to be leading this project towards developing Regional Cultural Strategies (RCS) while collaborating and thereby exchanging knowledge with representatives from regional and local government, various organisations, creative practitioners and other stakeholders.

This reflects a participatory approach to policy implementation as well as a strategic focus on the diverse communities that make up Malta's cultural and creative ecology. ACM's vision and strategy will remain fully committed to embrace the implementation of the RCS, endorsing their importance through the integration of specifically related strategic objectives within the recently launched ACM Strategy 2025. The consultation process was instrumental in the way the Council aims to localise the priorities set out in the National Cultural Policy. The policy is based on the principles of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

Culture plays a central role in building stronger, healthier and more cohesive communities while being integral to urban and rural societies and a catalyst for sustainable development. This resonates with a number of Sustainable Development Goals such as Goal 11, which makes reference to creating inclusive public spaces and protecting cultural heritage and practices. It is within this context that ACM has strived towards the design of these RCS and the overall strategic approach to supporting the cultural and creative sectors at local and regional levels.

Community and cultural exchange is one of the main pillars which ACM has been supporting and facilitating through various strategic and funding initiatives. Work is continuously in progress to create possibilities for local cultural spaces to serve as locations of cultural exchange. The need to do more in harnessing the distinctive and diverse cultural asset base of each region in Malta through the launch of these strategies is being acknowledged.

In the coming years, ACM intends to further develop and invest in these strategic areas, and others such as cultural entrepreneurship, research, internationalisation, education and development. Overlaps with other sectors such as health, environment and social aspects will be given more prominence responding to international urgencies. One ought to recognise that a nuanced understanding of local cultural assets is key to success in extending ACM's reach and exploring new territory. In light of this, one looks forward to seeing these strategies being transformed into action in tandem with the realisation of ACM's strategic aim of supporting the cultural wellbeing of Malta's regions in the coming years.

Natalino Attard,
Director General, Local Government



Following the last Local Government Reform Process and the legislative amendments to the Local Government legislation, the Regional Councils, have had their legal basis strengthened and have been given more important responsibilities, inter alia the inclusion of a set of defined functions in the Local Government Act. Culture sits firmly within this new legal remit, empowering Regional Councils to be instrumental in regional cultural development.

The Regional Cultural Strategies are envisaged to leave a positive impact on community-led cultural initiatives and programmes that address ambitious objectives to enable all citizens living in Malta and Gozo to participate actively in culture. Whilst safeguarding and promoting our rich cultural heritage we must also ensure that creative expression is enabled and celebrated across our diverse communities.

These strategies will serve as a framework for Regional Councils to collaborate with Arts Council Malta and implement an ambitious plan that strengthens existing programmes and creates new initiatives. They seek to improve coordination between different Local Councils for cultural initiatives and facilitate the creation of opportunities for new collaborations with artists, NGOs, cultural institutions and other stakeholders.

I congratulate the Regional Councils for their commitment to develop these cultural strategies and thank Arts Council Malta for initiating this process with us. We remain committed to support the implementation of the Regional Cultural Strategies through various means, but also through our existing Cultural Activities Scheme and other resources that will be allocated by the government in the coming years.

Mary Ann Cauchi,
Director Funding & Strategy, Arts Council Malta



Regional and local cultural development is at the forefront of Arts Council Malta's priorities to further incentivise and enable the valorisation of distinct forms of cultural and creative expression.

The six Regional Cultural Strategies (RCS) encapsulate significant overlapping and other distinct strategic objectives and provide for recognised frameworks for the collaborators, including ACM, to sustain and facilitate these relationships. They also enable it to further prioritise and stimulate the cultural and creative vitality of Malta's regions and localities, including their communities, practices, resources and infrastructure, amongst others.

Over the next years, ACM is committed to supporting and engaging with the Regional Councils through collaborations with Local Councils, organisations, creative practitioners and other stakeholders, enabling initiatives led by communities for communities. Through strategic direction, facilitation and support, ACM's commitment is reflected in increasing efficiency, maximising and increasing resources and mobilising processes to further valorise the importance of arts and culture in everyone's daily lives. The collaborators involved in this process are committed to nourish, protect and promote the diversity of cultural expression, increase accessibility and incentivise active participation.

Significant work has already been carried out to lay out the preparatory groundwork in the final stages ahead of their launch and subsequent implementation, Amongst others, these include the setting up of flexible roles and structures to facilitate understanding of the foundation required

to sustain a participatory approach. Following the exhaustive work by all those involved in the formulation of these strategies, an ongoing intensive familiarisation process has enabled ACM to identify a number of generic strategic objectives. These are primarily related to knowledge building, research, enhancement of cultural infrastructure, facilitation of local and regional cultural programming and governance, and development of ongoing evaluation and monitoring structures. Initiatives related to creative placemaking, social innovation, liveability and urban design will be prioritised and incentivised. Likewise, one can draw attention to and elevate community assets and cultural infrastructure; envision new possibilities for places; connect communities; and create and reinforce opportunities for partnerships.

The implementation of these strategies is entirely dependent on the willingness and motivation of all the stakeholders to work hand in hand, to understand different priorities and objectives, to collaborate and to support or be supported. The formulation of six unique strategies is an important step in the realisation that every region is distinct and diverse and that the initial familiarisation processes are key to understanding the uniqueness of communities, their challenges and resources. The journey which lies ahead is exciting as much as it is challenging, yet ACM will strive to continue to listen, understand and work collaboratively to reinforce the position of arts and culture within communities and places.

Clifford Galea,
President, Northern Regional Council



Care, Create, Flourish – these are the tenets that underpin Arts Council Malta's strategic vision for the upcoming years. For Malta's Northern Region, however, we have already been following this approach for some time.

Our villages are proud of their strong local identity, which is rooted in Malta's history. As we look ahead to the future, we – as the Northern Regional Council – are committed to working even harder to further define, shape and understand our identity, communicate it and nurture our sense of belonging.

To do so, we must follow a robust strategy that sets us up for success in delivering real change, which inspires our residents and engages them in cultural experiences. Be that as it may, co-creating a Regional Cultural Strategy is no easy feat. Our triumph in this regard relies on us understanding what defines our region, its values and purpose, as well as our behaviours, thoughts and standards.

Culture is a crucial part of our identity. Without culture, we are soulless, which is why we have already taken measures to strengthen our artistic and cultural opportunities. In the north, the two main cultural pillars in our villages are the band clubs and fireworks organisations, and both are pivotal elements in widening our cultural reach across communities.

United under our flag, which is our most recognised symbol as a region, we are witnessing reinvigorated enthusiasm and excitement surrounding our local communities, identity and the new cultural

opportunities being created. Together, we will flourish as a Northern region, and we will continue to channel our passion into our commitment to the implementation of our Cultural Strategy.

Overview

Size of Region

82.07km² (26%)
320km² (National)

Population

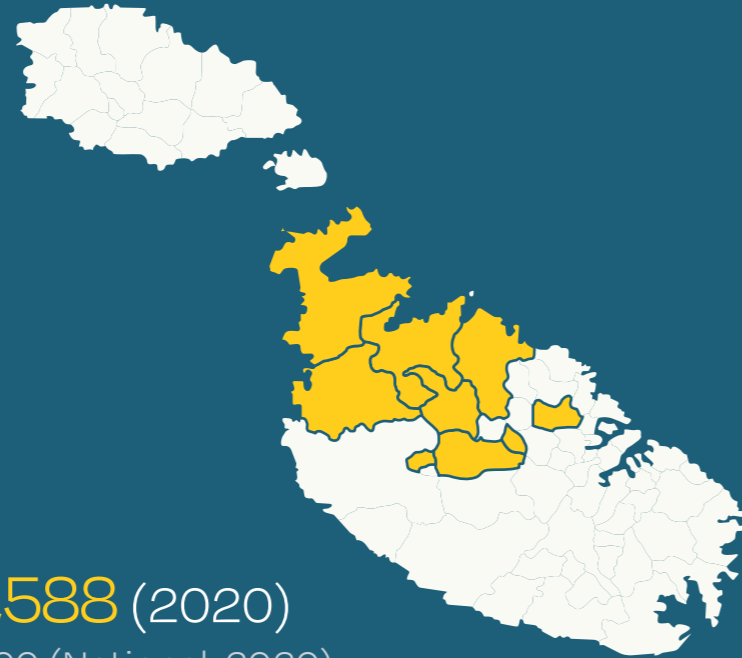
87,370 (2008) — **118,588** (2020)
410,926 (National, 2008) 516,100 (National, 2020)

Population Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR)

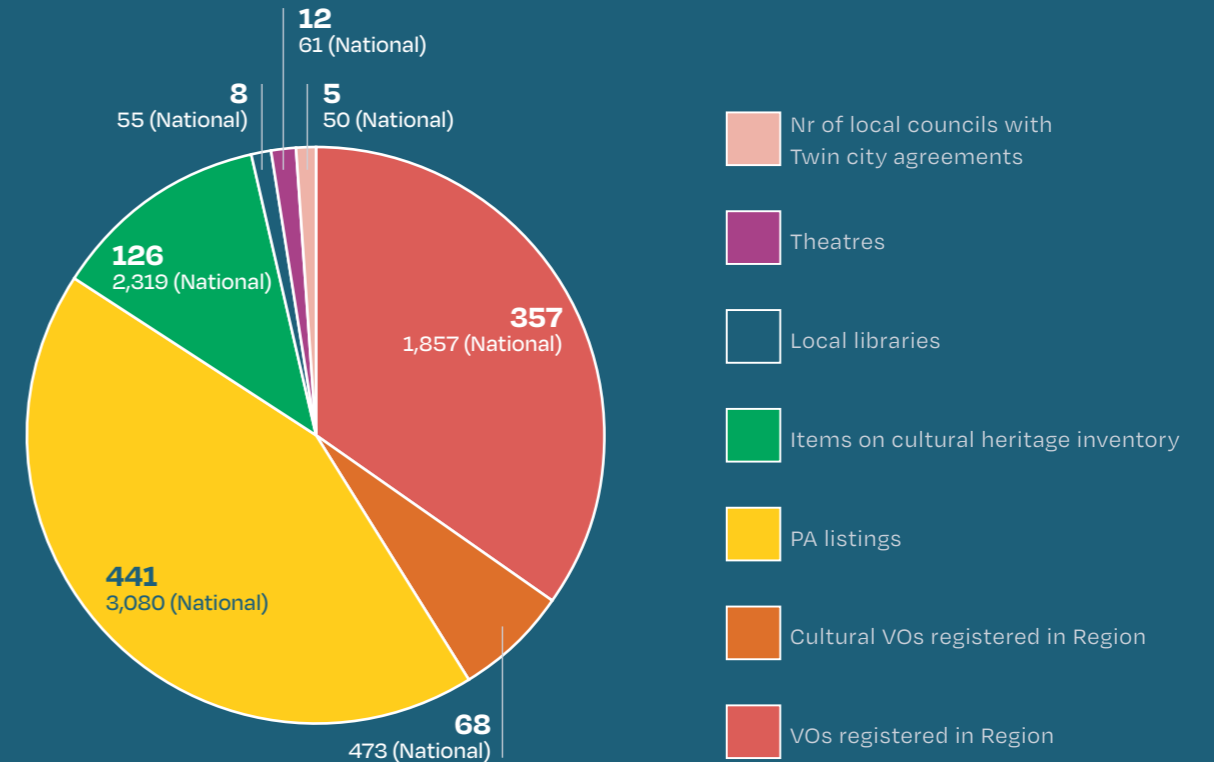
2.60%

Localities with Significant Changes

St Paul's Bay **6.5%** Mellieħa **3%**



Cultural Resources



Regional Libraries

Regional Libraries: **1** | Location: **Mosta**

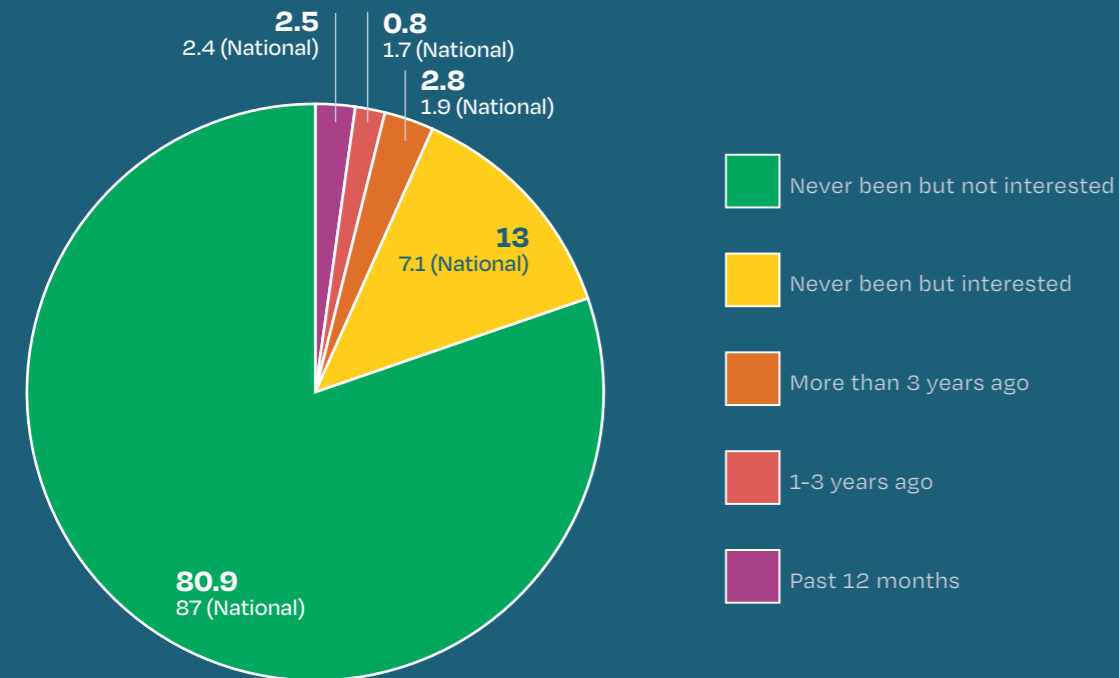
Books Loaned: **132,002**
1,031,868 (National, 2019)

Cultural Participation

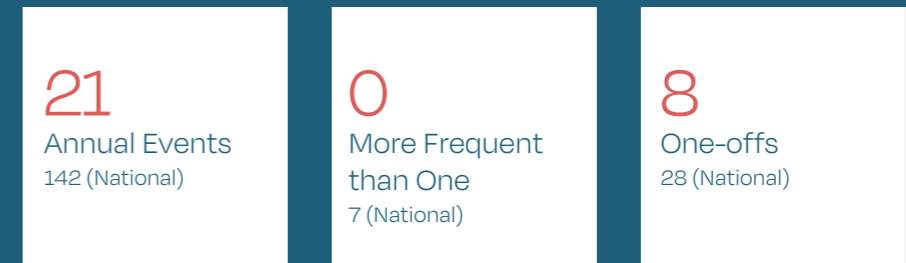
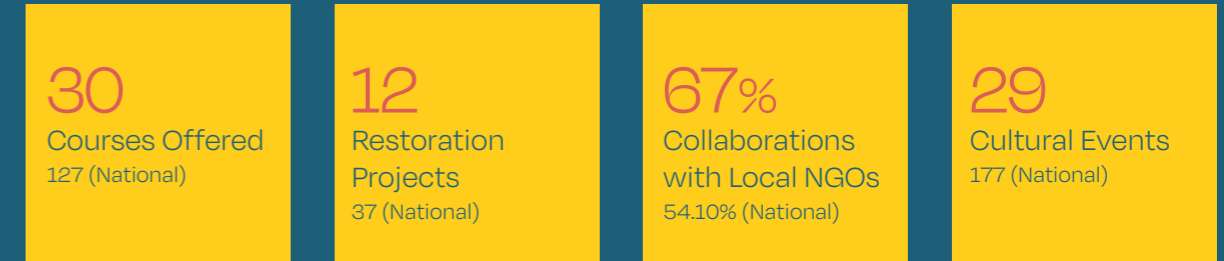
% of population attending



% of population actively involved in Local Council festivities



Local Council activities in region (2018)



1. Introduction

The cultural strategy for the Northern Region outlines the overarching cultural themes and priorities for the region from 2022 onwards. This cultural strategy, a first for the region, was developed with the Regional Council, Local Councils, non-governmental cultural organisations, Public Cultural Organisations, creative practitioners and residents of the localities. The Northern Region includes the following localities: Mellieħa, Mġarr, Mosta, Naxxar, St Paul's Bay, H'Attard, Hal Balzan, San Ġwann and Mtarfa.

The Provision of Cultural Strategy Development and Implementation to Local Councils and Regional Councils project is led by Arts Council Malta in collaboration with the Local Government Division and the Local Councils Association. It forms part of the ESF.04.079 project titled *Create 2020: Investing in Cultural and Creative Capacity Skills in Malta's Public Sector* that is financed through the European Social Fund, Operational Programme II – European Structural and Investment Funds 2014 – 2020 *Investing in Human Capital to Create More Opportunities and Promote the Well-Being of Society*. The co-financing rate of the project is 80% EU funds and 20% national funds.

This strategy:

- Explores and measures the asset base for culture in the Northern Region.
- Provides an overview of the key cultural assets of the region, the distinctive role played by culture, a gap analysis, and recommendations for building capacity and leveraging strengths so that culture can play a key strategic role in the development of the region.
- Makes the strategic case for culture – as a vital ingredient for civil society, for inclusive growth, and sustainable approaches to community and place.
- Provides opportunities for collaboration and benchmarking with regions across Europe – so that the Region can be both a pathfinder and a partner to best practice culture-led development.

The research which underpins this strategy involved extensive qualitative consultation to map and understand the cultural assets of the region. It included a desk-based analysis of cultural assets, a survey, and a period of critical discussion and consultation which provided a set of fresh perspectives on the role that culture can play in shaping the regions of the Maltese Islands. The strategy recognises the valuable contribution that culture already makes to the different regions, but also highlights the potential for a far wider engagement and development that would deliver a better future for all.

The overall aim of this strategy is to make the six regions of the Maltese Islands more dynamic, more open, more distinctive, and more enjoyable places, harnessing the power of culture to build stronger, healthier and more cohesive communities, to diversify and strengthen the economy, to revitalise Maltese heritage and to help address the social and economic challenges that the Maltese Islands face. For the purposes of this strategy, culture is being defined in its widest sense to embrace our identities and communities, our heritage, museums, local music halls, theatres, libraries, festivals, feasts, events, and cultural practitioners – artists, makers, performers, musicians, writers and the wider creative talent pool.



Folk Dancers. Mġarr. Photo by George Abdilla

To help maximise the value and influence of culture across Malta and Gozo and to ensure that the power of culture is harnessed to meet the regions' social and economic challenges, this strategy aims to:

- Foster better awareness of the role and value of culture, building on existing strengths and championing emergent ones.
- Promote equitable cultural investment so that everyone benefits from and has access to culture, irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity and other elements of diversity.
- Spearhead an active revitalisation of heritage assets – both building-based and 'intangible' – including the churches, band clubs, feasts and festivals.
- Invest in more engaged, more active, healthier and happier communities where active participation by young and old in diverse cultural activities is the norm.
- Promote and support a culture of healthy living and well-being within our communities.
- Facilitate the professional growth and sustainability of artists, creative businesses and cultural organisations growing in capacity to reach new and larger audiences and markets and

accessing talent that is more diverse and more representative of the region.

- Strengthen the cultural economy so that it adds value to the overall economy by contributing to the creative industries, tourism, the digital sector and science.
- Enhance regional identity and experience, making them even more dynamic, open, distinctive and enjoyable places to be.

2. Strategic Rationale for Culture

UNESCO (2005)¹ argues that placing culture at the heart of our strategies is both the condition for enabling sustainable development and a powerful driving factor for its achievement.

UNESCO asserts that:

- Culture, encompassing both heritage (tangible and intangible) and the creative industries, plays a critical role in urban and rural societies and is integral to their identity while underpinning their dynamism.
- Cultural and creative industries can be vital catalysts of development and renewal as they provide access to employment, introduce contemporary vibrancy, enhance a society's identity and help create more attractive places where to live, work, invest and visit.
- A heritage-driven urban and cultural policy also contributes to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change, as conserving the existing fabric (built with traditional techniques and local materials and skills) is more environmentally friendly than demolishing and reconstructing it.

Similarly, the European Commission² sets out the vital role culture plays in local development, not least in 'closing the opportunity gap' between different parts of Europe. The European Union is:

Fundamentally a political and cultural project based on strong humanist values. The fact is that the tapestry of European history, the rich diversity of European culture and Europe's reserves of creativity are some of the strongest cards we hold when it comes to building a prosperous European future. It is with new ideas, new concepts and new projects that we will rise to the challenges facing us to make our future a reality. And that's why the European Commission defends a Europe that invests in culture, in education, in research and innovation. These are investments in future growth, jobs and social cohesion.

A New Narrative for Europe (EESC, 2013)

Each region of the Maltese Islands has a distinctive and diverse cultural asset base. All the regions have a strong heritage landscape, often conceptualised in terms of historic buildings, feasts, band clubs and traditional approaches to music, crafts, agriculture and cuisine. These cultures are often linked to specific places – villages, towns, even neighbourhoods. Each region has a fascinating and, in some cases, dynamic contemporary cultural landscape – through the talent base of the people, the energy of the communities and through the fresh perspectives an increasingly diverse population brings. The opportunity now is to recognise and celebrate these cultural assets, to be frank and open about gaps and challenges, and to develop a strategic process where culture can play a starring role in the social, economic and environmental futures of the regions of the Maltese Islands.

1 Convention for the Protection and Promotion of a Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005). See full text at: <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/convention>.

2 A New Narrative for Europe - The EESC resolution on the Conference on the Future of Europe (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021). See full text at: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/new-narrative-europe-eesc-resolution-conference-future-europe>



Festa Baned. Mellieħa, 2021. Photo by George Abdilla

2.1. Legal functions and strategic outcomes

This strategy reflects the functions of the Regional Councils as outlined in the Local Government Act (ACT No. XIV of 2019).

Legal function	Overall strategic outcome in the field of culture identified in the strategy
The social aspect, that includes research on and evaluation of social impact. This report shall be made within the first year of each legislature.	This strategy is based on evidence collected from the extensive qualitative and quantitative research conducted as part of the process. Monitoring and evaluation is integrated as an outcome of the strategy.
The provision of assistance to Local Councils within the region, which assistance includes the provision of professional services relating to the environmental, social, cultural, touristic and information technology sectors.	Assistance by the region in the field of culture is outlined in the deliverables of the strategy, prioritising the role of the region as a facilitator of cultural development.
The provision of assistance to Local Councils within the region to help them benefit from European Union funds and successfully manage programmes which are funded by the European Union.	The objectives put forward in this document can serve as a strategic base for the identification of cultural projects that may be co-funded through programmes of the European Union.
The coordination with Local Councils of sports and physical activities and initiatives, including those relating to welfare.	Culture as an incentive for physical activity and the well-being of citizens has been embedded in the strategy as a deliverable.
The coordination with ministries, departments and Government entities to facilitate the work of Local Councils.	The strategy calls for close collaboration with the ministry responsible for culture, the Arts Council Malta and Public Cultural Organisations to ensure successful delivery.
To give an opinion regarding the Local Plan that will be attached to the report submitted to the House.	Urban and rural sustainability through culture and the protection of cultural heritage are identified as major strategic components that impact Local Plans.
The preparation of an annual Work Plan that identifies the financial and human resources needs of the region.	The delivery of the strategy is attached to yearly Action Plans delivered by the region and the Local Councils within the region.



Regjun Tramuntana International Choir Festival. 2019. Photo by George Abdilla

2.1.1. The role of Regional and Local Councils

The strategy considers the legal obligation of the Regional Councils to provide Local Councils with assistance to address their cultural functions as outlined in the Local Government Act, namely to:

- Provide for the establishment, upkeep and maintenance of cultural centres.
- Administer local libraries as part of a national scheme and ensure that they are as accessible as possible to all persons.
- Safeguard the local identity and take the necessary measures to safeguard the local historical and cultural heritage, traditions and folklore.
- Extend assistance to artists within their locality to help them develop their talents.
- Organise cultural activities that promote the locality in every possible way.
- Promote the concept of lifelong learning with all residents, particularly with adults and the elderly, by providing lifelong learning opportunities within the locality.

As wellbeing, sustainability and decentralisation become more visible in *Malta's National Cultural Policy 2021* (Ministry for The National Heritage, The Arts and Local Government, 2021), the leading role of Regional and Local Councils in this process will become even more important.

The NCP 2021 states that the cultural remit of Regional and Local Councils will be widened to include improved resource management for local cultural infrastructure and cultural heritage and initiatives for cultural innovation and community engagement (Ministry for The National Heritage, The Arts and Local Government, 2021). It recognises the need to implement Regional Cultural Strategies by introducing coherent administrative procedures for the management and co-management of cultural events and educational programmes. These include lifelong learning programmes which will reflect the needs of the community, taking into consideration shifts in demographics and population in different regions in the last few years. Specifically, in regions with a high concentration of non-Maltese residents, the Regional Councils shall design programmes that

are tailor-made for this shift with the objective of integrating all residents within the regions.

Notwithstanding the distinctive characteristics of regions, the NCP 2021 also supports measures for collaboration and networking of regions in their design of their cultural programmes, their management of cultural heritage, their input in the restoration of facades and their efforts for the sustainable management of the cultural environment.

By addressing strategic measures that tackle the specific challenges, but also identify the strengths and unique selling propositions, of localities within the region, this strategy builds on national priorities that include improving the cultural access and participation of citizens, supporting cultural diversity and integration and building new partnerships between public cultural institutions, regions and cultural NGOs. The policy also reflects on how culture and the arts can leverage, support and sustain specific activity in local tourism, education, economy and health.

The regions can, with a coordinated and ambitious approach to partnership and investment, be much enriched by building on their cultural assets, strengthening partnerships, developing capacity in knowledge and skills, planning projects over the long-term, and encouraging new types of culture to flourish so that tradition and innovation can stand side by side.

Inspired by the insights and experiences of people who work tirelessly for the localities and the strong evidence-base generated by the research, the Regional Councils are entrusted with enabling the cultural development in the region using this strategic framework and other resources that may be leveraged at both the national and the European level.

This strategy draws on three transversal themes that are common to all the regions. It also introduces priorities for each region.

3. Key Transversal Themes for Culture across the Maltese Islands

This strategy draws on three transversal themes that are common to all the regions and introduces specific priorities for this region.

On analysing the cultural assets, opportunities and challenges of each of the six regions, which form this overarching research programme, a set of three shared, or 'transversal', themes became clearly apparent. The themes reflect a shared cultural development reality for the Maltese Islands as a relatively small nation with an incredibly rich heritage offer and significant capacity, partnership and investment challenges. The themes are introduced below.

Theme 1: Talent development

The regions of the Maltese Islands are rife with cultural and creative talent, with people being the main cultural resource for the nation. For example, there is real expertise in a range of traditional cultural forms, including the art and performance related to carnival, band clubs, and an enormous range of festivals and events. There are distinctive cultural memories, rites and rituals, which spark the popular imagination and mobilise a wide variety of cultural activities.

Furthermore, each region has a blend of unique cultural strengths expressed in the skills, activities and aspirations of the people. However, we are not yet maximising the full potential of the cultural talent pool. Too many people find it hard to build sustainable careers in culture. There are serious capacity limits for cultural organisations, with many struggling to make ends meet and grow sustainably. Emergent communities from different parts of the world have not yet found the platform to express their culture and contribute to an increasingly compelling mix of cultural traditions across the regions.

This theme is about building capacity, skills and partnerships within the cultural talent base. Its intention is to mobilise a cultural workforce where more people are active making culture – both professionally and as a key part of their lives. It

seeks to ensure that the cultural sector is open to all and maximises the ideas, aspirations, energies and skills of an increasingly diverse population. It prioritises the development of programmes and infrastructure that provide the conditions for talent to flourish. This includes the introduction of cultural and arts education; the development of specialist cultural skills, management and entrepreneurship support; and, the coordination of cultural hubs, networks and partnership activities which build visibility, voice and confidence across the cultural sector.

Theme 2: Audience engagement

Culture is a way of life for the people of the Maltese Islands. In comparison with many parts of Europe, the level of participation in cultural events, such as feasts and carnival celebrations, is high. For many, participation in cultural events (and their preparation) is part of their way of life. However, outside of a relatively narrow range of cultural activities, audiences are still emergent. There is a general lack of active participation in cultural activities such as in instances where women feel excluded from events predominantly led by men. Ethnic minority communities and people with disabilities experience a more general sense of exclusion from active participation in all cultural forms. Much more can be done to build active audiences that are intercultural and intergenerational and who feel able to contribute to the way culture is presented, promoted and programmed.

This theme focuses on strengthening active and diverse audiences for a variety of cultural forms across every region. The theme prioritises social inclusion as a principle for a dynamic and responsible cultural system. It encourages cultural organisations and NGOs to work in partnership to open up the cultural offer, to avoid clashes in cultural programming and to encourage a coordination of programmes and their communication. It supports convening activities, such as shared promotion and ticketing systems, coordinated approaches to audience engagement for communities that are not adequately involved and targeted interventions which encourage cultural tourism, where the tourist is an active member of the audience rather than an onlooker on the margins of the activity.

Theme 3: Heritage innovation

The regions of the Maltese Islands have a layered history, each layer having been shaped by the people living on the islands at the time, each creating a distinct sense of identity and place. The heritage of the Maltese Islands encompasses an astonishing array of tangible and intangible cultural assets: a wealth of ancient temples, citadels, churches and cathedrals, second world war shelters, beautiful streets and vibrant squares that are animated by festivals, music and memory building events. Much of the energy, resources and priorities for culture have focused on the protection and refurbishment of the tangible heritage assets, which is vital if the country is to remain a jewel in the Mediterranean. It should be ensured that overdevelopment does not compromise Malta's heritage strengths and cultural tourism is harnessed so that it can play a role in the preservation and sustainability of the heritage offer. However, the focus on protection has,

in some instances, limited the potential of heritage innovation – where heritage assets are revitalised and re-imagined as spaces, platforms or forms for contemporary use and where different narratives are formulated which posit the future as a departure from the past.

This theme focuses on heritage as a resource for contemporary cultural development and innovation. This is where cultural organisations and their audiences and partners play an active role in engaging with the past and nurturing possibilities for the future. This is where new partnerships are developed to conserve and re-purpose heritage through the active production of new types of cultural activity from a changing population. And this is where cultural tourism and the creative industries can help generate new income which can be re-invested in heritage development.

For each of the three transversal themes, the region has a set of distinct strategic priorities. These are introduced in the next section.

3.1. Shared priorities for culture across the six regions

Each transversal theme is linked by five overarching priorities:

Connecting rural communities and smaller towns

Connecting rural communities and smaller towns to build stronger cultural links and bring the countryside to the city and the city to the countryside. It is vital that communities are both internally and externally connected, with

opportunities for the members of the communities to participate in a range of cultural activities and to exchange and co-create new cultures which enhance well-being and facilitate a stronger sense of place.

Building capacity

Building capacity in cultural infrastructure and for cultural organisations with a commitment to supporting emergent cultural organisations as a vital component of ongoing cultural and creative renewal. This also means the development of good

governance practice in the selection of events, the utilisation of available resources, the methods of community engagement and the documentation and analysis of outcomes.

Invigorating partnership and diversifying investment

Invigorating partnership and diversifying investment across Malta and Gozo. Existing partnerships require consolidation, strengthening and innovation. Partners within and between each region need to re-frame their approach to investment in culture, also placing it at the heart of education, planning, health and well-being. This will require synergy between the

various strategic stakeholders to develop a common cultural plan. The formation of a Regional Cultural Committee, with the participation of Local Councils, NGOs and creative practitioners, will facilitate more participatory decision-making. On the other hand, the Regional Cultural Officer supports the implementation of the Regional Cultural Strategy.

The European dimension and beyond

The Maltese Islands are a hub with strong historic links to many countries but efforts must be made to counteract a growing tendency towards insularity.

The region can be better connected to the rest of the world and would benefit from cultural exchange and partnerships with international partners.

Evaluation and evidence

The outcomes of the cultural strategy must be measured to assist partners to identify ways to improve delivery and ensure that the vision and themes of the strategy are impactful over the long term. This would help the implementers of the strategy to gain a better understanding of the assets of each locality within the region and gain valuable

regional data about underutilised venues and how to better engage resident artists and NGOs based in the area.

4. Cultural Profile of the Northern Region

4.1. Profile

4.1.1. Demographic profile

The Northern Region brings together the nine north-western localities and has an area of around 82.07km² (31% of the total area of Malta). The latest population statistics issued by the National Statistics Office (2020) show that the region has a population of 118,588 – which is equivalent to 23% of Malta's population – fairly distributed between males and females. The compound annual growth rate is 2.6%, which is the second highest for Malta and Gozo after the Eastern Region. St Paul's Bay has a growth rate of 6.9% – the highest of all the localities in Malta and Gozo. Population statistics for 2020 show that the number of residents in the region were as follows: Mellieħa (11,693), Mġarr (3,985), Mosta (21,495), Naxxar (15,388), St Paul's

Bay (31,789), Mtarfa (2,612), H'Attard (11,774), Hal Balzan (4,741) and San Ġwann (15,111).

According to the 2021 population census, 20,285 residents in the region are aged 65 years and over – this is equivalent to 21 % of the total elderly population of Malta (National Statistics Office, 2022). The region also has one of the highest concentrations of non-Maltese residents. Around 80% of non-Maltese residents are workers aged around 30 years who come to the island without their families. This has substantial implications for the region as it creates bottlenecks in the educational system and housing market.

4.1.2. Economic profile

Culture-related expenditure by the region was €142,365.81 in 2018 (the third highest in the country). Coupled with the fact that the region boasts a diverse spectrum of cultural assets, ranging from seaside and countryside attractions to leisure centres and historical sites, it is evident that the region has ample opportunity to diversify its activities for its core communities and beyond.

Nevertheless, there is a growing concern that urban development within the region is posing a threat to its cultural assets. The region also has one of the highest percentages of persons experiencing deprivation (20%).

4.1.3. Cultural profile

The 2019 Esprimi research on cultural initiatives by Local Councils in the region indicates that the region ranks second highest in terms of cultural events organised by Local Councils (29 events in 2018). The main events organised were the Commemoration

Day of the locality and organised cultural visits. The survey findings show that many of the Local Council representatives in the region (90%) were not satisfied with the participation of citizens in the events held and 67% were non-committal about the

value given by residents to the culture in the locality. Of these activities, more than half (67%) were co-managed with local NGOs while the rest (33%) were fully organised by the Local Councils.

The survey results also showed that the Local Councils in the region generally feel a high level of ownership of the local assets. This could be because they manage or co-manage most of the historical sites and public spaces in the region. This is also evident in the responses to the survey given by the representatives of the Local Councils who feel empowered to address the cultural priorities of the locality.

The Northern Region registers the highest percentage share of all regions (36%) in terms of attendance to art exhibitions, libraries, concerts and live performances (National Statistics Office, 2017). The lowest attendance levels were for dance performances (16%); a percentage share which is, however, still above the national average. There was also a general below average participation in traditional activities, such as the Good Friday processions, National Public Holidays and Carnival, which could partly be explained by the fact that there is a high number of non-Maltese residents in the area.

4.2. SWOT analysis for the Northern Region

Below are a set of overarching headline findings drawn from the research and consultation exercise that informed this strategy:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Cultural heritage assets - the region is very rich in this aspect, having a myriad of tangible and intangible heritage assets. Such assets could be better used to enhance cultural engagement across communities. → A balance between rural and urban areas - the region is known for its rural areas which retain some of the more traditional landscapes of Malta that include diverse flora and agricultural fields that provide for beautiful scenery. → Collaboration and sense of friendship between core communities - many of the localities in the region have a strong sense of community that goes back generations. While this might make it difficult for new generations and incoming communities to integrate, the strength of the community can be nurtured as an asset for all residents. → Cultural diversity - the distinctive cultural diversity in the region generates many opportunities for creative exchange and the development of new cultural programmes. The balance between the local traditional community and diverse newer communities could be a real strength within the region. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → A perceived 'parochial mentality' with resistance by some to embrace change - while core community sentiment can be a strength, it could also be a cause of strain and discontent, especially in relation to any forward-looking proposals put forward. It can also be a resisting factor in terms of the opportunities that diversity brings. → Lack of cultural and organisational capacity - for example, there seems to be limited professional expertise in events management and cultural and creative understanding. Although there is a strong impetus to create events for the community, understanding and knowledge of event management and how to engage audiences among Local Councils is limited. → A system that is predominantly centralised and run by Central Government - conversations with the local stakeholders revealed a common concern about how the present national governance system operates. The highly centralised system is perceived to be a hindrance to the daily operations and prospective organisational development of the localities and the regions. → Lack of awareness of local assets and community interests - given the limited cultural exchange between communities and a historical lack of asset mapping and promotion, cultural assets have not been viewed as a key resource for the community and regional development. → Divergent priorities (between the region and localities; between different localities) - the priorities of the region and the localities are not always aligned due to the specificities of the localities. Relations between the region and the different Local Councils and among the localities themselves are sometimes strained, with each locality lobbying for its own aims. → Disenfranchised communities and disconnection with cultural programming - typically, non-Maltese residents do not actively engage in cultural activities organised by the Local Councils. From research, it is evident that the events organised by the Local Councils are highly influenced by identity politics, in turn reflecting the dominant cultural narrative of the 'Maltese identity' resulting in a general lack of representation in terms of diversity and multiple identities. This increasingly widens the gap between intrinsically local communities and others who feel disconnected.

Opportunities

- Targeted activities for international visitors – the strengths of the region could serve as the ideal platform for targeted activities and facilitate an increased international dimension. This would help generate revenue through cultural tourism and increase opportunities for international exchange.
- Local tourism – the various heritage sites, substantial countryside, agrarian economy and seaside attractions could all provide opportunities for communal sharing among local residents and visitors. Such rich cultural diversity could translate into a more targeted strategy leading to events interlinked with specific sites and audience demographics.
- Use of available theatres, libraries and town halls – the public infrastructure and spaces which are available for the localities could be better utilised by the community and the creatives to develop tailored initiatives for the region. Public spaces managed by the Local Councils could serve as the ideal places to organise knowledge-sharing sessions and meet-ups.
- A high percentage of residents are interested in being involved in organised cultural events – the Cultural Participation Survey (Arts Council Malta, 2017) revealed that there is evidence of strong interest from the community to engage in diverse cultural activities. A more inclusive cultural plan, drawn up with the direct engagement of the local stakeholders, could help encourage greater engagement and participation.

Threats

- Overdevelopment – the rapid recent increase in the population has put extra strain on the already limited resources of the localities, with the risk of other resources across the region being neglected.
- A rise in the number of people risking poverty and social deprivation – this makes it even more important to develop inclusive and participatory cultural activities and to leverage culture as a resource for social and economic development.



Piazza Toni Bajada on the 8 September.
Naxxar, 2022. Photo by Clifford Galea

5. Priority Actions for Culture-led Development in the Northern Region

The actions identified across the priority areas address the following objectives:

The role of the Region in facilitating cultural development.

Increasing collaborations with local cultural NGOs, creative practitioners and other stakeholders for events organised by Local Councils.

Improving connections with diverse communities and empowering them to engage in the cultural life of the region.

Developing the potential of cultural tourism towards better environmental sustainability in both rural and urban areas.

Promoting the region's natural and built heritage by sustaining advocacy for its protection and coordinating the diversification of use for cultural purposes.

Transversal theme	Priority area	Indicative actions	Short term (1 year) Medium term (2 to 4 years) Long term (5 years +)
1. Talent development	The building of organisational and individual capacity and connecting rural communities and smaller towns	Collate valuable data – as a coordinated and consistent approach to sector mapping. The challenge of measuring cultural diversity and perceived low levels of cultural inclusion of new residents in the region requires cultural mediators and arts community professionals. These can further reach out to members of diverse communities and consequently enable the region to address the concerns and aspirations of all residents.	Long term
1. Talent development 2. Audience engagement 3. Heritage innovation	Connecting rural communities and smaller towns and capacity building	Formulate a Regional Cultural Committee and appoint a Regional Cultural Officer who will support the Region and Local Councils throughout the implementation of this strategy, thus facilitating their respective projects and plans.	Medium term
1. Talent development 2. Audience engagement 3. Heritage innovation	Capacity Building, connecting rural communities and smaller towns, invigorating partnership and diversifying investment and the European dimension and beyond	Co-create a database that collates data on the region's cultural assets, NGOs and practising artists, communities, demographics and other relevant information. Prioritise the participation of representatives from minority groups. Facilitate the distribution or management of funds with Local Councils, create a selection matrix system based on artistic value that will involve NGOs and/or creative practitioners and other stakeholders, budgets and the level of community engagement and representation. Facilitate the development of a yearly cultural plan which includes, but is not limited to: best use of available resources (venues, funds and staff), satellite events which cater for the various community groups, and major events which aim to raise appreciation for culture and the arts. Formulate documentation and analysis methods for initiatives that are implemented.	Medium term
1. Talent development 2. Audience engagement 3. Heritage innovation	Capacity building, connecting rural communities and smaller towns, invigorating partnership and diversifying investment and the European dimension and beyond	Implement the cultural plan in synergy with the region's vision and aims of the localities.	Long term
1. Talent development 2. Audience engagement	Evaluation and evidence	Analyse the impact of implemented initiatives and plan for a new cultural strategy plan.	Long term

6. Conclusion

This cultural strategy for the Northern Region highlights the role of culture in the development of this distinctive part of Malta. It provides the rationale for a stronger regional approach to cultural governance, investment and delivery and aims to create more opportunities for collaboration between stakeholders, while maximising accessible resources. It seeks to build capacity in cultural organisations and communities and to open-up cultural participation and programming so that the region's growing cultural diversity can be more fully embraced.

The formulation of the Regional Cultural Committee to ensure participatory governance is meant to create more direct lines of communication between the localities, as well as facilitate better representation of the communities in decision-making processes. In this context, there is also a greater need for inter-regional collaboration, particularly in light of the changes made to the borders of the region that previously included the traditional 'Three Villages' (H'Attard, Hal Lija and Hal Balzan) but which now excludes Hal Lija. Similarly, strategic partnerships need to be set up between other towns and villages that the region already collaborates with such as Naxxar and Hal Gharghur.

With the establishment of good governance practices, the Regional Cultural Committee will enhance its chances to make an impact and improve the appreciation of culture and the arts across the region. If successful, the development of such practices could then be facilitated across and within the localities, thus creating an interlinked system of research and development processes that could help improve the decisions made on all types of issues, even beyond culture.

The role of the Regional Cultural Officer, in collaboration with the Regional Cultural Coordinator, is essential to oversee the above-proposed actions and further ensure that the required mentorship and expertise are available to the region to facilitate the collation of data, event management and planning and the general attainment of the targets set by the strategy.

7. Appendices

Acknowledgements

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Clifford Galea	President	All representatives from Local Councils in the Northern Region including Mayors, Executive Secretaries and Councillors responsible for culture from: Mellieħa, Mġarr, Mosta, Naxxar, St Paul's Bay, H'Attard, Hal Balzan, San Ġwann and Mtarfa.	
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