

The Executive Chairperson
Planning Authority
St. Francis Ravelin,
Floriana

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ERA Ref.: EA/00007/22

Planning Ref.: PA/07333/22

Project Title: Proposed upgrading of existing airfield including the extension of the runway, construction of a concrete-surfaced apron, three grass-reinforced aprons and perimetral retaining walls, shifting of security fence and new landscaping.

Location: Gozo Rural Airfield, Triq ta' Lambert, Għajnsielem

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Reference is made to the case in caption and ERA's previous assessment, which included screening in accordance with Regulation 14 of the EIA Regulations (S.L. 549.46) and screening in terms of Regulation 19 of the Flora, Fauna, and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44) (dated 21 December 2022, refer to <https://era.org.mt/era-project/pa-07333-22>).
- 1.2. Screening had determined that an EIA was not required, however noise and vibration needed further assessment vis-à-vis the operational use of the airfield.
- 1.3. Screening in terms of S.L. 549.44 had identified the need for an Appropriate Assessment (AA) to assess whether the proposal will or will not adversely affect the integrity of the protected Natura 2000 sites within the area of influence of the airfield.
- 1.4. The afore-mentioned studies were submitted to ERA on 3 May 2024, with final versions and subsequent clarifications referred on 24 June 2024 and 08 July 2024, respectively. The said reports are available on the above-mentioned ERA webpage.

2. Study on the potential effects from noise and vibrations during operational use of the airfield, on the ambient noise climate of the surrounding environment

- 2.1. The study involved the modelling of scenarios for the projected use of the airfield, including:
 - a) *Scenario 1* – main scenario: daily flights (capped at 50 per day) including scheduled service flights, charters, air ambulance, AFM operations.
 - b) *Scenario 2* – alternative scenario: as per scenario 1, except for amended track usage for inter-Island link service flights, with a re-routing of the night flights (to use a shorter circuit).
 - c) *Ground noise* - representing a day of ground operations, with take-off in one direction and landing in the other, or vice versa.

d) *Construction-phase* – representing noise generation by earthworks and machinery.

2.2. Both daytime and night-time noise effects have been assessed, in view that in addition to daytime air operations, a limited number of air-link movements are also proposed to take place during the night. Noise measurements were taken at eight locations, representing communities or localities, as well as two locations along the Ta' Ċenċ cliff area representing bird nesting areas (refer to figure 1 below).

2.3. The present baseline noise levels are dominated by road traffic noise in all measurement locations. Additionally, a concrete product manufacturing plant was identified as a source of daytime noise at locations F5 and F7 (refer to figure 1). Currently, the only aircraft noise source associated with the existing airfield are the emergency use of helicopters in function of services for the Gozo General Hospital.

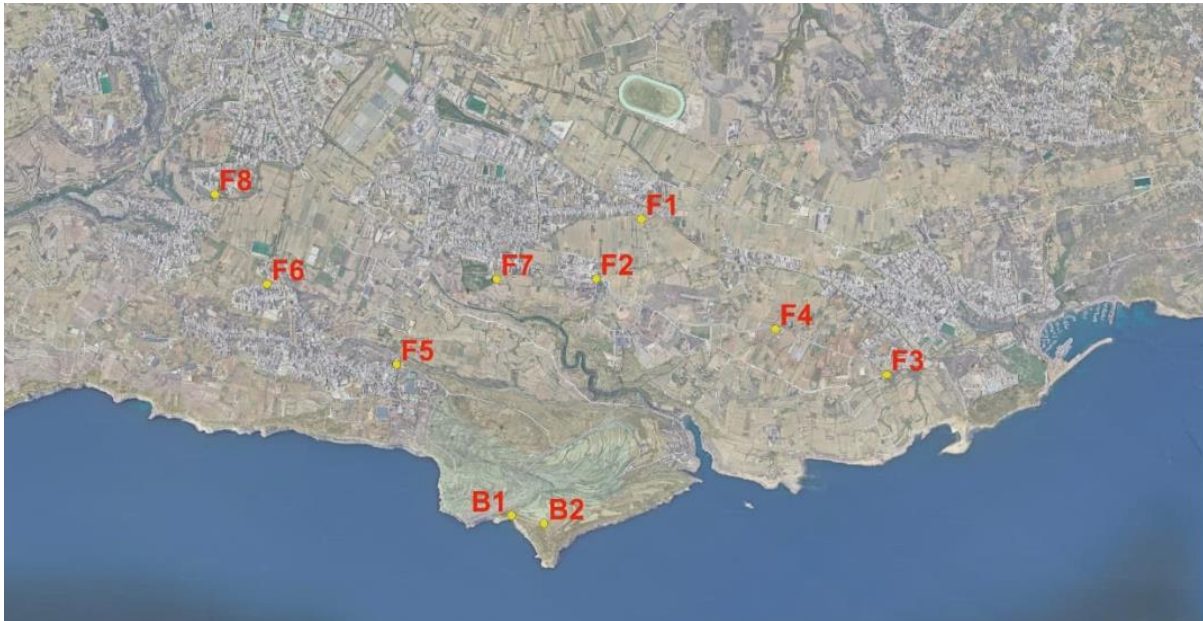


Figure 1 - Locations where measurements were taken, to represent the surrounding environment and sensitive receptors (*Source: Noise and Vibrations Study Report*).

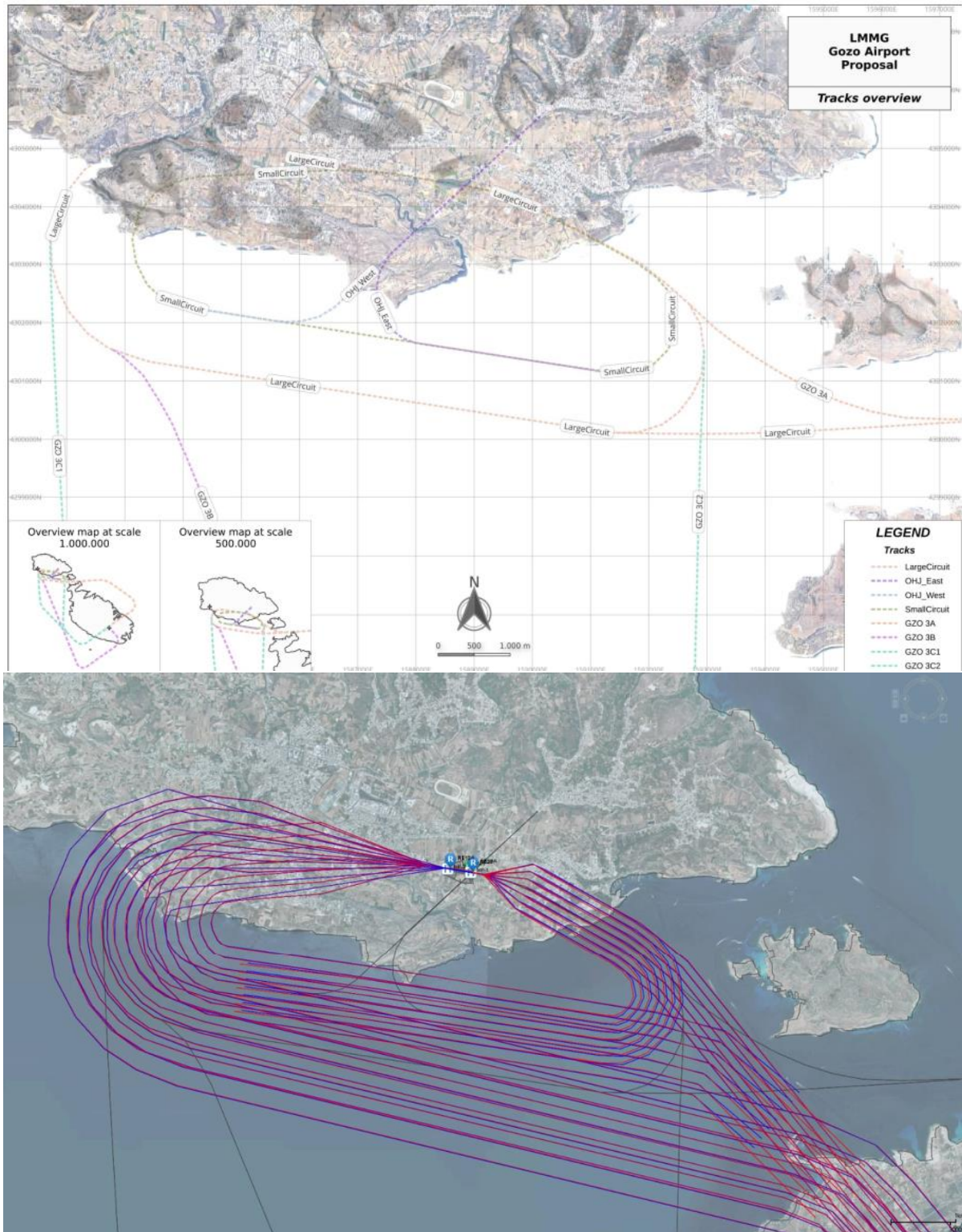


Figure 2 – Flight track dispersion, for the typical aircraft envisaged for the proposed airfield (*Source: Noise and Vibrations Study Report*).

- 2.4. During operations, noise from aircraft activity is expected to be significant in two locations F2 and F7 (Figure 1), with the latter being significant at night-time. While other locations are expected to experience imperceptible or insignificant impacts, an increased risk on sleep disturbance (although not high) was identified for the locations F7 and F8 during night-time. Ground operations have significant effects on locations F1 and F2, especially when flight departures are east, and arrivals are west. Vice versa, with departures for the west and arrivals are east, significant effects were assessed on F4. Cumulatively, the most significant effects are concentrated at locations F2 and F7 due to air ground noise combined with road traffic noise. No significant effects from vibrations are envisaged.
- 2.5. While effects on protected species are assessed in detail in the Appropriate Assessment (refer to section 3 below), the Noise Study report does consider effects from the proposal on the wider environment, including the Mġarr-ix-Xini bay area. The consultant noted that noise effects from the airfield operations are likely to be of lesser significance than the already existing anthropogenic activity in the bay, which are further aggravated by canyon effects. Furthermore, none of the flight paths envisaged are situated directly above the valley.
- 2.6. Noting the above, the study report also considers various potential mitigation measures/operational restrictions that may be implemented during operations.
- 2.7. In addition, the study concludes that with respect to receptor location F7, a further gradual divergence on take-off to the south would reduce the noise effects on this location. However, immediate changes in direction from take-off would expose these locations to the aircraft's noise cone.
3. Assessment in terms of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44)
- 3.1 The Appropriate Assessment (AA) assessed the potential effects of the proposed airfield and its operations on the below protected Natura 2000 sites, with a direct focus on effects on avifauna:
- MT0000034 - L-Inħawi ta' Ta' Ċenċ - Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Site of Community Importance (SCI);
 - MT0000027 - Rdumijiet ta' Ghawdex: Ta' Ċenċ - Special Protection Area (SPA); and
 - MT0000112 - Żona fil-Baħar ta' Madwar Ghawdex – SPA.
- 3.2 Protected sites MT000034 and MT000027 both encompass the Ta' Ċenċ area and its cliffs and are designated for the protection of sensitive and important terrestrial habitats and various bird species, including Cory's shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*), Yelkouan Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*), European Storm-Petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus melitensis*), Blue Rock-thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) Short-toed Lark (*Calandrella brachydactyla*), and more.
- 3.3 Within the marine environment, protected site MT0000112 is a large, protected area (SPA) that encompasses the entire coastal and sea area surrounding Gozo, Comino and the northernmost stretch of Malta. This large marine area was designated due to its importance during the breeding

season of Cory's shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*) and Yelkouan Shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*). With respect to MT0000104 (marine SAC, immediately offshore the Ta' Ċenċ cliffs), such site was designated for the protection of marine benthic habitats, and hence such is not considered to be within the area of influence of the proposed project and did not merit further investigation.

3.4 The AA considered and assessed the following potential environmental effects:

- a) Construction-phase disturbance (e.g. noise, light, increased activity) to breeding, wintering, and migratory birds;
- b) Operational disturbance (e.g. noise, light, increased activity) to breeding and migratory birds resulting from the activities generated by the runway; and
- c) Disturbance/harm to breeding and migratory birds in case of an accident on land or at sea, and from resulting risk of fuel spillage or fire.

3.5 Following surveys and literature review, a total of 51 bird species have been confirmed to breed within the study area, although during the time period 2022-2023 only 17 species were confirmed to breed in the area. An example provided in the AA, is the Peregrine Falcon and Kestrel, which were not recorded breeding in their previously known areas in Mgarr ix-Xini, Ta' Ċenċ/Sanap.

3.6 With respect to construction-phase impacts, the AA Report concluded that impacts are unlikely to affect bird populations, both those present in the immediate vicinity of the airfield as well as those present on the cliffs. This is in view that bird species present in the immediate surroundings are not particularly sensitive and vulnerable to such temporary disturbances, and the distance to the nearest cliffs is sufficient to render any noise and light effects (e.g. on breeding Shearwater populations) insignificant. However, the latter is subject that works are avoided during the most sensitive period of the breeding birds' lifecycle, namely the breeding period, and works should be carried out in autumn, between September and December.

3.7 Similarly, during operations, no significant effects on protected birds are envisaged from ground operations at the airfield, as well as from overflying airplanes. With respect to seabirds nesting in the coastal cliffs, the distance to the airfield (approximately 2 km) is assessed as sufficient to avoid any disturbances from operations at the airfield, also noting the natural shielding by the sheer cliffs and the nest burrows. Aircraft flying over the cliff area at over 1,000 feet above ground level are also not expected to pose any threat to seabirds, neither at their breeding colony nor when rafting at sea. Protected habitats within the Ta' Ċenċ area are also not expected to be affected by the airfield operations, unless an accident scenario would take place whereby fuel/oils are spilled. However, such risk already exists in the current situation as the area is already overflown by light aircraft and helicopters both for recreational purposes as well as for travel, and such risks are to be addressed through the adherence to the appropriate aviation standards.

3.8 In conclusion, the AA report has concluded that no residual significant impacts are expected that may adversely affect the integrity of the protected sites, as long as appropriate construction phase measures are duly implemented to avoid disturbance during the breeding season.

4. Conclusions and recommended way-forward

- 4.1 Following the conclusions reached by the Noise and Vibrations study and the Appropriate Assessment, ERA notes that the proposal is not expected to significantly affect the integrity of the protected Natura 2000 sites. While no significant adverse noise effects on the natural Ta' Ċenċ and Mgarr ix-Xini areas are envisaged, the study has concluded that air and ground operations will likely affect residential receptors in the immediate surroundings of the airfield as well as the Xewkija locality. The consultant has clarified that such effects are inevitable due to the nature of an airfield in operation and the associated flight, take-off and approach zones, and changing the orientation of such zones would displace the effects to other areas rather than mitigate these. Further to that, the report highlights that the assessed effects of ground operations, with the currently proposed restriction to propeller aircrafts with engine mitigation measures, are less than those to which the site is currently permitted for and could be currently exposed to (helicopter operations/ferrying with no limitations apart from direction of approach and take-off).
- 4.2 After taking into account the various environmental considerations and impacts pertaining to the proposed development and its operations, ERA does not object to the proposed upgrading of the existing airfield from an environmental point of view, subject to conditions in Annex 1.