



FAMILY
SHAPING THE
FUTURE OF
OUR SOCIETY

A Social Plan for the Family

2024 - 2030

Public Consultation Document



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA
MINISTRY FOR SOCIAL POLICY
AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS



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Hon. Michael Falzon

Minister for Social Policy and Children's Rights

MINISTER'S FOREWORD

Families are the cornerstone of society, providing essential support, nurturing relationships, and fostering the well-being of individuals across generations. In recognising families as the bedrock of society, Government has developed this proposed **Social Plan for the Families** with the keen conviction that prioritising investment in families is an essential imperative for fostering thriving communities and building resilient societies.

This comprehensive plan stands as a dedicated response to the diverse, multifaceted realities confronting families across Malta and Gozo. While acknowledging the intricate interplay of various sectors, policies, and individual circumstances that shape family life, the proposed Social Plan for Families presents the basis for a robust roadmap committed to creating a society where families can thrive.

The development of the proposed Social Plan for the Families was guided by three core principles: Social Wellbeing, Diversity, and Resilience. These principles underpinned our endeavours to create a plan that improves families' access to necessary support, celebrates their uniqueness, and equips them to navigate challenges effectively. It is through these principles that we aim to chart a course towards a brighter, more inclusive future for all families across our islands.

Together we can further refine the proposed Social Plan for the Families so that it truly makes a lasting and meaningful difference in the lives of families across Malta. I therefore call upon all stakeholders and individuals to actively participate in this public consultation process, lending your invaluable insights and experiences. Your contributions will surely enrich the proposed Social Plan for the Families, ensuring it reflects the diverse needs and aspirations of our communities.

Your engagement is vital, and I look forward to our collective efforts in shaping a brighter future for all.



Mark Musù

Permanent Secretary
Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights

PERMANENT SECRETARY'S MESSAGE

The proposed Social Plan for the Families represents a crucial stride towards a society where each family thrives, embodying Government's response to evolving societal needs. Recognising the complex interplay of family life with various sectors, policies, and circumstances, it is clear that creating a one-size-fits-all plan for all family issues is impractical. This policy signifies Government's inaugural national policy on families, tailored to navigate the complexities of family dynamics.

The overarching priorities identified within the proposed Social Plan for the Families are clear reflections of Government's commitment to building a society where every family can flourish. **Social Justice** stands at the forefront, ensuring that all families, especially those in disadvantaged situations, receive the support and opportunities they deserve. **Healthy Relationships** are another priority within the plan, recognising their profound impact on individual well-being and societal harmony. Empowerment through **Knowledge and Skills** is another crucial focus, equipping families with the tools to navigate life's challenges and seize opportunities for growth. Lastly, we address the critical issue of **Malta's Fertility Rate**, understanding the significance of socio-economic factors in family planning decisions. Through these priorities, we aim to create an environment where families are empowered, relationships are strengthened, skills are honed, and the future of family life in Malta is secured.

The proposed Social Plan for the Families is also a result of in-depth evidence-based research and consultations with the main stakeholders. This inclusive process emphasises the shared responsibility we hold in supporting families. Government, civil society, communities, and individuals, all have a fundamental role in creating a society where families thrive. The collaborative process behind the proposed Social Plan for Families has not only engaged stakeholders but also led to the identification of crucial priorities.

I envision this consultative document as a catalyst, sparking vibrant discussions and nurturing collaborative efforts. Together, we can forge tangible measures that resonate deeply with the diverse needs of families across our islands, ultimately making a profound and lasting impact on their lives. Your engagement is not just important—it is essential. I eagerly anticipate the synergy of efforts from our valued social partners, NGOs, and the public at large. Let us unite our voices and expertise to craft a roadmap that truly reflects the diverse needs and aspirations of our communities, paving the way for a brighter and more inclusive tomorrow.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The proposed Social Plan for the Families is a dedicated response to the diverse and evolving needs of our society, with a particular focus on families facing significant challenges. The overarching objective of the Plan is to empower families and elevate their overall quality of life.

The intricate fabric of family life, shaped by diverse sectors, policies, and circumstances, renders the creation of a singular plan addressing 'all' nuanced factors unrealistic. Nevertheless, cognisant of the shifting landscape of societal demands and the impact of international influences, Government considers timely to devise a Plan to provide comprehensive support tailored to unique circumstances. This proposed Social Plan seeks to not only address immediate gaps and obstacles but also foster sustainable improvements in the well-being of families across varied situations.

The development of the proposed Social Plan for the Families involved thorough research and consultations to understand Malta's current context and future family challenges. After a pre-consultation event that engaged stakeholders to identify key issues, the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights further followed through a number of bilateral consultations with government entities and main stakeholders. These efforts aimed to gather insights and expertise to inform comprehensive interventions. The feedback from these discussions shaped the drafting of the Consultation Document for the Social Plan. The ongoing public consultation process will further refine and strengthen the plan based on continued input from stakeholders.

Through a combination of targeted measures and strategic initiatives, this Plan seeks to create an environment where families can thrive, overcome obstacles, and flourish within their communities. Accordingly, the proposed Social Plan for the Families focuses on four main priorities:

1. In the pursuit of **Social Justice for Families** in disadvantaged situations, this proposed Social Plan emphasises the imperative of addressing social inequalities to enhance well-being. By extending comprehensive support and services to disadvantaged families, recognising unique needs, and empowering groups within society, the plan aims to foster inclusivity and belonging. It advocates for equal opportunities through investment in education, employment, and social services, while also highlighting the significant role of community support. Targeted interventions, early intervention strategies, and evidence-based policymaking are key pillars in creating a just and equitable society where every family has the chance to thrive, overcoming adversity and breaking cycles of disadvantage.

2. **Healthy family relationships** form the bedrock of individual and societal well-being. Recognising the challenges of modern life, the plan seeks to create a positive family environment by promoting a balance between work and family life, enhancing family assistance services, and fostering understanding in partner relationships. Through initiatives that empower individuals with moral values, cultural inclusivity, and dedicated spaces for quality time, families can nurture strong connections, resilience, and well-being across the life course.

3. Empowering families with essential basic **Skills and Knowledge** is paramount for their resilience and success in navigating the complexities of modern life. The proposed Social Plan for the Families aims to prioritise the development of fundamental abilities, enabling families to effectively manage challenges and seize opportunities. By focusing on areas such as effective parenting skills, life skills, digital literacy, and financial management, the plan lays the groundwork for a transition towards a knowledge-based society.

4. Malta's low **fertility rates** present a multifaceted challenge influenced by evolving societal norms and economic dynamics. To address this issue, the proposed Social Plan for the Families aims to adopt a comprehensive approach. Prioritising family-friendly workplace policies, affordable housing solutions, and economic stability initiatives, Malta seeks to create an environment conducive to family formation. Education and awareness programmes will also empower individuals with the tools to make informed decisions about family planning and parenthood.

To ensure the effective implementation and monitoring of the Social Plan, a High-Level Group for Implementation and Monitoring will be established. This group will develop a comprehensive monitoring framework with quantitative indicators and timelines for each initiative, supplemented by qualitative assessments through surveys and stakeholder feedback. Transparency and accountability will be ensured through regular public reports and feedback mechanisms, fostering continuous learning and adaptation to meet the evolving needs of families and communities.

The proposed Social Plan for the Families requires a collaborative effort between Government and civil society to foster a society where all families can prosper. Success relies on the collective responsibility of every individual, Ministry, entity, and community to actively support and implement the initiatives outlined in the plan.

The proposed Social Plan for the Families represents more than just a collection of policies; it serves as a roadmap towards a shared vision of enduring positive change, safeguarding that no family is left behind. The expected outcome is to cultivate an environment where families are empowered to thrive.



THE VISION



THE VISION

Our proposed Social Plan for the Families is dedicated to fostering a society where every family can thrive.

By prioritising inclusivity, resilience, and well-being, we envision a future where families receive tailored support, contribute meaningfully to their communities, and collectively shape a compassionate and equitable society for generations to come.

Families have deep and enduring effects on the well-being of individuals and society. At the personal level, besides being entrusted with the provision of basic necessities, families serve as the foremost wellspring of emotional, social, and financial support. Simultaneously, at the national level, families play a pivotal role in fostering social stability and cohesiveness, contributing to and determining the development of socially responsible individuals.

This proposed Social Plan for the Families builds on Malta's Social Vision 2035 which highlights the need to provide adequate interventions for the continued support and strengthening of the family nucleus in Maltese society.

Malta's Social Vision 2035 emphasises the need for families to be resilient and capable of managing life's challenges, ensuring no discriminatory treatment based on family types. It also highlights the importance of enabling families to develop their socio-economic and psycho-social capacities, providing adequate family services that are accessible to all. The vision calls for policies to address emerging family arrangements, sensitise employers to contemporary family challenges, and promote a work environment conducive to a healthy work-life balance.

Recognising the impact of demographic trends, such as fertility, life expectancy, and migration, the vision emphasises the need to consider these factors in future policies. Additional efforts are needed to improve the quality of the environment, creating safe recreational spaces for families and sustainable management of natural resources. Ultimately, Government aspires for families to be equipped to face present and future challenges, serving as a source of social capital and fostering meaningful relationships for future generations in homes, workplaces, and society at large.

The proposed Social Plan for Families also builds upon the foundation laid by other main national policies and strategies (some of which are illustrated in the figure below), integrating their principles and objectives to create a comprehensive framework for supporting family well-being and resilience.



Our Approach – What We Know So Far

Families are affected, directly and indirectly, by policies in many areas within and beyond the social field. The development of a proposed Social Plan for the Families requires a clear understanding of the current and possible future challenges. After a series of internal consultations, a thorough evidence desk-based research was carried out to delve into the available data and trends of the current situation of the national context. This resulted in the identification of a number of existing challenges faced by families in Malta. The main findings are presented in Chapter 2.



At Pre-Consultation Level

In 2022 the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights organised a pre-consultation event with the main stakeholders. The main aim of the pre-consultation phase was to help better understand the realities and experiences of families with the objective of identifying, defining and analysing the main issues, challenges, barriers, concerns and opportunities that are foreseen in the medium and long-term.

During the pre-consultation event, several key points were highlighted regarding the challenges and needs of families in Maltese society. Working parents face difficulties in **balancing work and family responsibilities**, particularly due to financial obligations and time constraints for children's extracurricular activities. Financial pressures impact single-earner households, and there's **a discrepancy between desired and actual family size** due to work and financial constraints. The rising **housing market poses environmental and societal challenges**, while external factors like COVID-19 and global events affect family life. It was highlighted that the **employers have to be incentivised or solicited** to further consider family needs, and there's a call for more flexible work arrangements.

Adequate family policies, including **parental leave**, are crucial investments. Cultural integration, **educational reforms focusing on life skills**, and recognising the role of grandparents in families were also emphasised.

Technology addiction, media literacy, and child-friendly environments were highlighted concerning technology's impact on families. In the social sector, **skilled professionals and timely family court systems** are needed, along with legislative changes to address related issues including **parental alienation**.

These discussions underscored the need for comprehensive support, policy reforms, and societal shifts to ensure the well-being and resilience of families in Malta.

Further Bi-Lateral Consultations

In 2023 and 2024, the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights continued its efforts to gather insights and feedback on family-related issues by conducting a series of bilateral pre-consultation meetings. These meetings were particularly focused on engaging with Government Ministries and entities to delve deeper into specific aspects of family well-being, challenges, and potential policy interventions. The aim was to gather detailed input, exchange ideas, and seek expertise from various sectors of the government to inform the development of comprehensive and effective policies.

In particular, the discussions covered topics in relation to **work-family balance, social support systems, demographic trends, educational and skills needs, housing**, the role of **legislation in supporting families** and **family relationships**. These bilateral engagements served as crucial platforms for collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and the co-creation of strategies to enhance family well-being and resilience within Maltese society.

Feedback gathered from the above mentioned discussions was analysed and contributed to the drafting of this draft Consultation Document for a proposed Social Plan for the Families 2024-2030.

Efforts must continue to be sustained and further consolidated through the feedback that will be received as a result of this public consultation process.

1.1 So, What's the Plan?

Family life is a complex tapestry impacted by various sectors, policies, and life circumstances, making it challenging, if not impossible, to devise a singular proposed Social Plan capable of addressing 'all' the nuanced challenges and factors influencing families.

In recent years, from a public policy perspective, promoting the well-being of families has been a responsibility shared by different Government Ministries, entities and agencies. In recognising this intricacy, the proposed Social Plan for Families aims to serve as a foundation to address the main gaps for enhancing familial well-being, particularly for the families in the most disadvantaged situations.

While acknowledging the need for diverse and targeted approaches, this plan sets the stage for fostering resilience, offering support, and creating an environment conducive to the overall welfare of families. Through its focused initiatives, it strives to uplift those facing

adversity, ensuring that the multifaceted nature of family life is met with a comprehensive and compassionate response.

1.2 The Strategic Objectives

This proposed **Social Plan for the Families** aims to respond to the diversified and evolving needs of our society, addressing the main challenges and difficulties faced by families, especially those in the most disadvantaged situations.

By acknowledging and adapting to the changing landscape of societal demands, the proposed Social Plan aims to provide comprehensive support. This is particularly crucial given the dynamic international circumstances that continually influence our realities. This involves not only addressing immediate challenges but also fostering sustainable improvements in the well-being of families across various circumstances.

The overarching goal is to enhance the quality of life for families through the development and implementation of tailored measures, guided by the principles of social justice. The commitment to social justice underscores this plan's dedication to fairness, equality, and inclusivity in its approach to supporting families.

The orientation of this plan is geared to foster a proactive and preventative mindset, emphasising the cultivation of family strengths and resilience. This approach is prioritised to deter the occurrence of problems, aiming to remove negative factors or mitigate the impact of existing factors that adversely affect family functioning.

The ultimate objective of the proposed Social Plan for the Families will be to empower families and enhance their overall well-being through:

1. The design of appropriate interventions which reflect the ever-changing challenges diversity of the family;
2. Supporting an environment which supports families (particularly during child rearing years) during the life course; and
3. The provision of necessary support services, skills and abilities to better manage challenges.

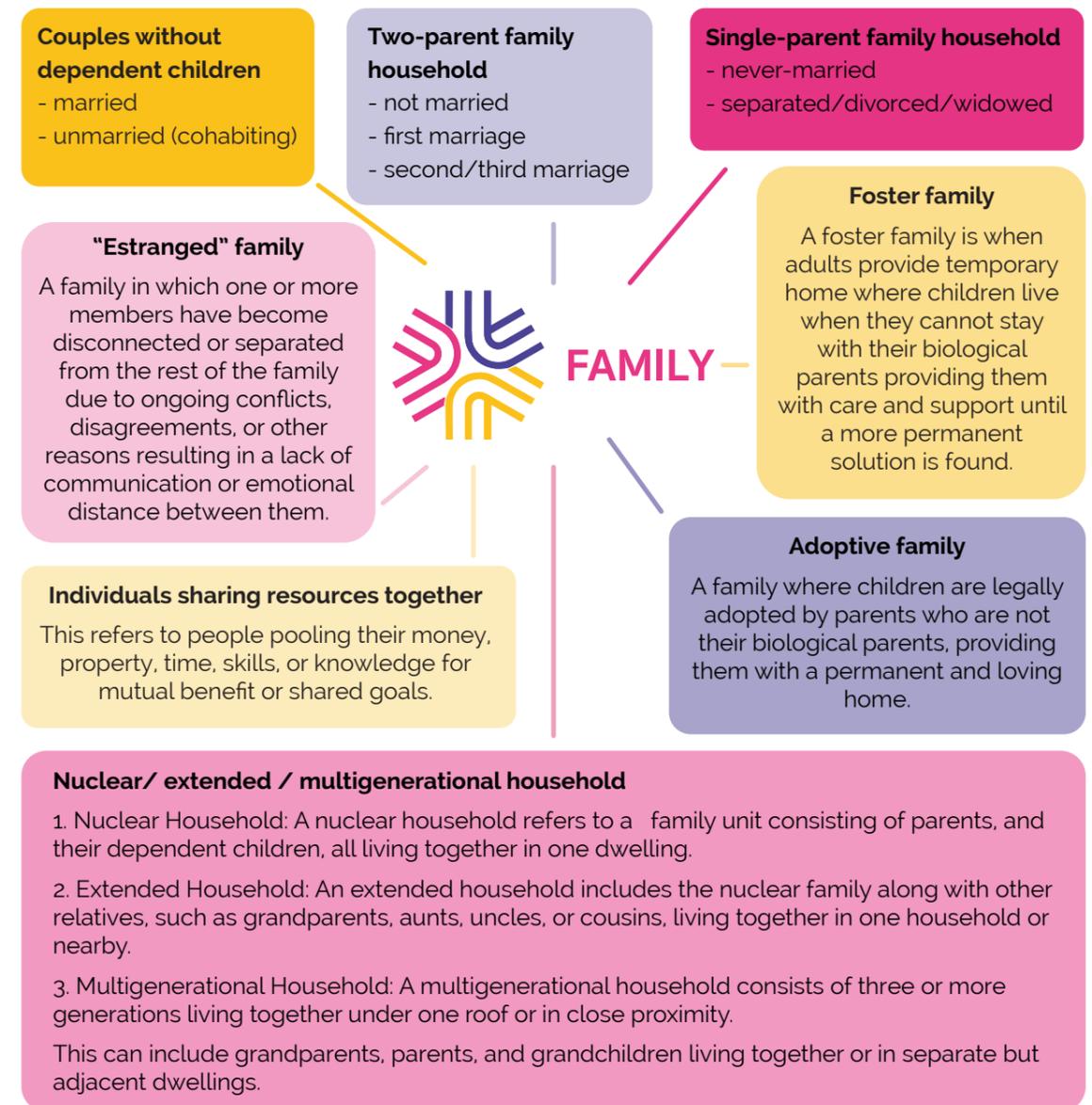
1.2.1 A Response to a Declining Fertility Rate

The proposed Social Plan for Families also presents a strategic direction by Government to tackle Malta's persistent low fertility rate and demographic decline (this will be further detailed in the subsequent chapters). As a crucial step, the plan prioritises comprehensive measures to address demographic challenges and endeavours to create conditions conducive to family growth. This multifaceted approach underlines Government's commitment to reversing the trend of declining fertility rates and fostering a sustainable and thriving population in Malta within strengthened families.

1.3 The Transformation of the Family Structure

The 'Family Unit' traditionally consisted of a married man and woman, with biological or adopted children. However, in today's realities, this understanding does not reflect a true picture of society. With the ever evolving and changing realities of society, the term 'Family' as a unit has broadened. While the traditional family unit is still fairly common in Malta, other forms of families are becoming increasingly prevalent, with the idea of the 'typical family' with a male breadwinner and a housewife taking care of children becoming everyday less reflective of the Maltese society. New social trends have resulted in multiple forms of the family as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 : Different Family Compositions



Source: Ooms, T. (1993). What is a Family: Implications for Policy. Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars, Washington DC. Presented at Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar 1: Building Policies That Put Families First: A Wisconsin Perspective. Available at: https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/fii/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/s_wifs01c02.pdf.

The recognition of diverse family configurations is crucial when designing meaningful and effective support systems. Inclusive parenting and family support programmes must adapt to and acknowledge the evolving landscape of family structures. Ensuring that support initiatives cater to a wide range of family forms is essential for their relevance and impact.

In order to provide a realistic understanding of the term 'Family', which also takes into account the emerging different family forms within society, this proposed **Social Plan for**

"Any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibility for various combinations of some of the following: physical maintenance and care of group members, addition of new members through procreation or adoption, socialisation of children; social control of members; production, consumption, distribution of goods and services; affective nurturance".

1.4 Three Pillars Guiding the Proposed Social Plan for the Families

Building upon existing policies initiatives, the proposed Social Plan aims to embrace the principle of leaving no one behind and to improve the quality of life of families through the provision of appropriate support. In this regard, the plan focuses on the following three main pillars:

Social Wellbeing of the Family

Wellbeing¹ is a multidimensional concept which should be looked at from different perspectives, namely, the physical, social, economic and psychological. Social wellbeing impacts the quality of life of the individuals within the family and has a direct impact on the social wellbeing of society as a whole. Despite a growing diversity of couples and family forms, the basis for the social wellbeing of families lies in having, supportive and fulfilling **family relationships** and **environment**.

Research² also indicates that wellbeing and life satisfaction for families is linked to a number of other factors including income adequacy; healthy lifestyles, the natural environment and work life balance, amongst others.

¹ The concept of wellbeing is sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of quality of life or life satisfaction.

² Sammut Scerri, C., Grech Lanfranco, I., & Abela, A. (2019). "Family wellbeing: A look at Maltese families" in S. Vella, R. Falzon & A. Azzopardi (Eds). Perspectives of Social Wellbeing: A Reader. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishing House.

¹ Spitzer D. L. (2018). Family Migration Policies and Social Integration: United Nations Expert Group Family Policies for Inclusive Societies. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/05/Family-Oriented-Migration-Policies-and-Social-Integration.pdf>

Diversity

Building on today's realities and contemporary challenges, it is crucial to also acknowledge that diverse family forms face different family challenges.

Whilst strengthening the endeavour to support families that have different characteristics, values and circumstances, policy initiatives and services need to keep in view and address the fact that family formations are becoming increasingly diverse. Indeed, an effective, realistic, practical and inclusive plan for the families lies also on the acknowledgement and acceptance of diverse family forms, dimensions and challenges, along with the recognition of the different family needs to function effectively for the benefit of society as a whole, primarily for the family.

Whereas stigmatisation, marginalisation and segregation may take place towards the diversity of family life, the approach of this policy framework is that of respect and inclusion to continue to build on the positive impacts achieved.

Resilience

Resilience¹ underlies the functionality of the family when faced with stress and adversity. It is important that families have the necessary capacity to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges. The environment within the family and the environment surrounding the family can cushion or intensify the effects of events happening.

Families require access to affordable quality basic necessities, particularly where there are vulnerable members within the family, such as children, older persons and persons with disability and/or chronic mental health challenges.

In order to ensure resilience, it is of utmost importance to continue providing an environment, surrounding the family, that can overcome vulnerabilities and structural disadvantages. This is specifically significant in cases of families exposed to poverty and social exclusion, harm and abuse that may have negative long-lasting impacts on children even throughout their adulthood.

¹ Resilience refers to the ability to recover and adapt positively in the face of adversity or significant stressors. It involves bouncing back from difficult situations, maintaining well-being, and thriving despite challenges. This definition draws from Masten, A. S. (2018). Resilience Theory and Research on Children and Families: Past, Present, and Promise. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*

1.5 Expected Outcomes

Family life has become increasingly diverse and complex, leaving families exposed to different forms of stressors. Chapter 2 will present the main strengths and weaknesses of the national context, as well as the main emerging opportunities and threats. Based on this analysis, and after taking into consideration the feedback received during the pre-consultation sessions, the proposed Social Plan for the Families prioritises the following **four** main themes on which to design the required actions and measures.

1. Social Justice for the Families: to further provide and enhance adequate support and services to families in disadvantaged situations. Families with members who have specific needs require additional support. By improving the overall social wellbeing, all families are to have the necessary opportunities and assistance to thrive.

2. Healthy Relationships: "To nurture a positive family environment that helps individuals to better manage life stressors through constant comfort, guidance, and strength. Healthy family relationships improve and lead to wellbeing across the life course."

3. Empowerment through Knowledge and Skills: To prioritise the development of fundamental abilities and to enable families to navigate challenges and seize opportunities. Empowering families through essential basic skills, will lay the foundation for a transition towards a more advanced level of a knowledge-based society."

4. Enhancing Malta's Fertility Rate: to address various socio-economic factors influencing family planning.

Identifying the main priority themes within the proposed Social Plan for the Families is crucial for directing focused efforts and resources toward areas of significant impact. The primary themes outlined in this plan revolve around enhancing family well-being, fostering resilience, and addressing challenges at various levels.

The Policy choices taken by Government over recent years have shaped the life of families in a number of ways. The following chapter will provide an evidence-based analysis of the current national context through statistical data that will highlight existing and emerging family challenges and needs. This analysis is the point of departure to strengthen the policy making process that will lead to the building of a conceptual framework to achieve the desired results.





NATIONAL CONTEXT

NATIONAL CONTEXT

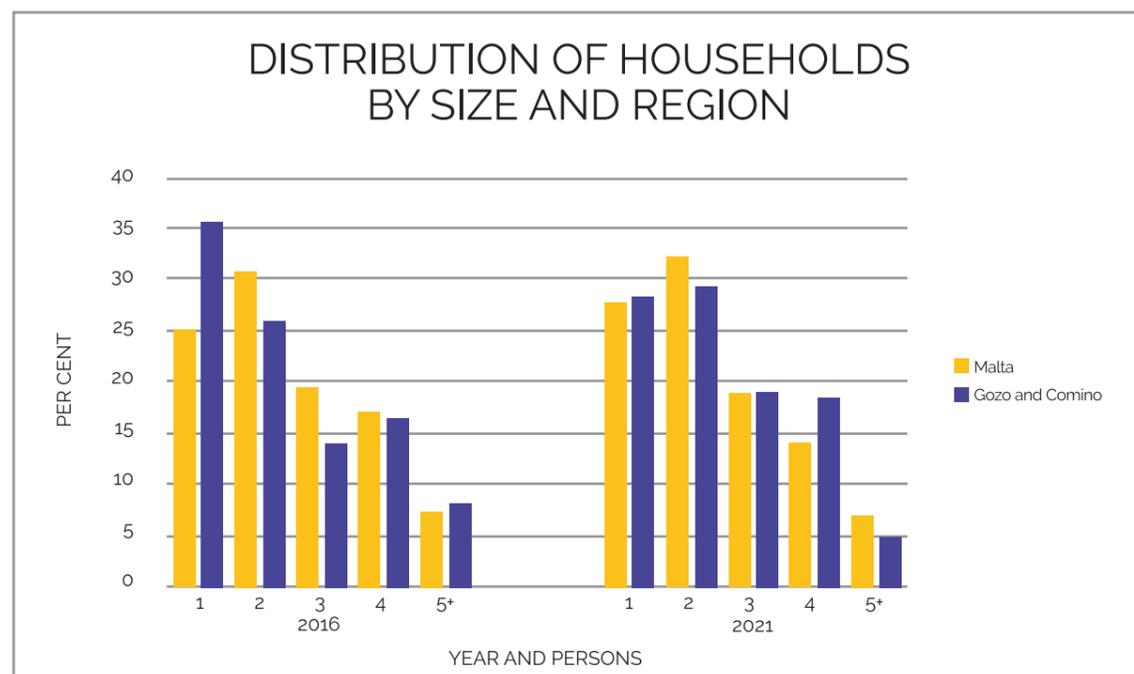
Families in Malta have gone through significant and unprecedented changes over the years. Government has been steadfast in its commitment to uplifting families, in recognition of their invaluable role in our society. In the last decade, Government has implemented a range of policies, measures, and initiatives aimed at providing crucial support to every family, especially those facing hardship and adversity. This chapter will highlight the current national policy context and through an evidence-based approach, will provide a thorough analysis to highlight the primary challenges confronting families.

2.1 Demography

In recent years Malta has experienced a rapid increase in population. While in 2010 the population stood at 414,027¹, the 2021 Census of Population and Housing, estimated the total population at 516 thousand persons² living in 210 thousand private dwellings. The estimated population stood at 542, 051 by the end of 2022³, a further 5% increase from 2021.

The below Table 2 illustrates the distribution of households by size (number of persons living in the household) and region⁴ between 2016 and 2021. Households with 2 persons are the majority, followed by single-person households. The number of three-person households has remained stable, but there has been a reduction in larger households of 4 or more persons. This is a reflection of the decreasing fertility rate

Table 2: Distribution of Households by Size and Region



Source: NSO

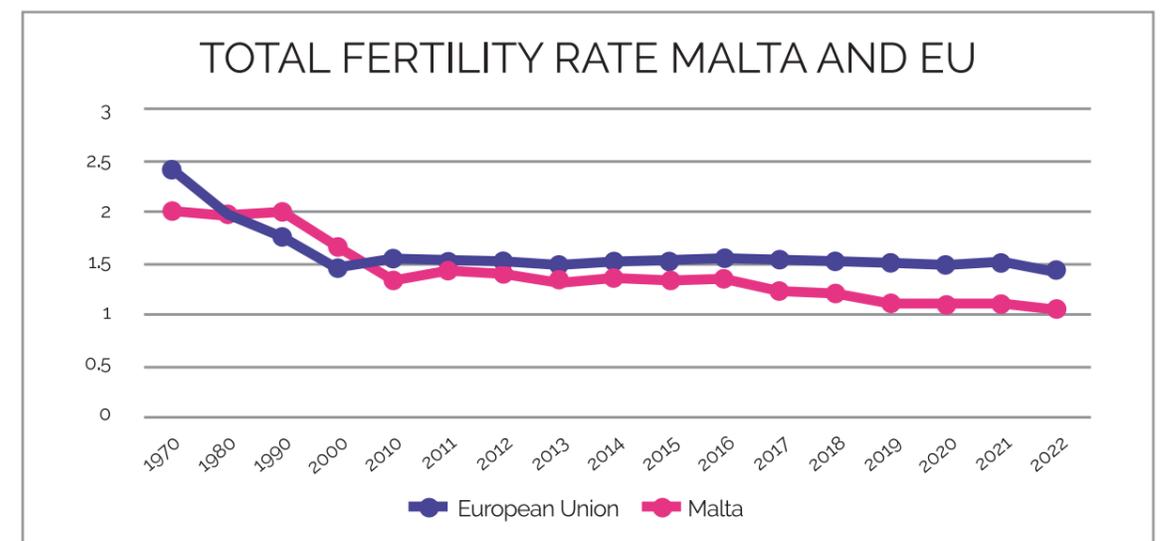
¹ Population on 1 January by age and sex. Available at: demo.pjan_custom_g369089 (Accessed: 16 January 2024).
² Census of Population and Housing 2021: Status report. Available at: <https://nso.gov.mt/census-of-population-and-housing-2021-status-report/> (Accessed: 16 January 2024).
³ NSO World Population Day: 11 July 2023 <https://nso.gov.mt/world-population-day-11-july-2023/> (Accessed: 08/01/2024).
⁴ NSO. Regional Statistics MALTA 2023 Edition Available at: <https://nso.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/Regional-Statistics-Malta-2023-Edition.pdf> (Accessed: 08/01/2024)

2.1.1 Fertility

Malta's Total Fertility Rate¹ has seen a precipitous decline over the last 50 years. In Malta, the Total Fertility Rate was at 2.14 births per woman in 1977, just above the Fertility Replacement Rate² of 2.1. This has now fallen to 1.07 births per woman in 2022³, the lowest fertility rate in Europe, and one of the lowest globally. Malta has also seen a long-term decline in the crude birth rate⁴ (from 9.6 in 2015 to 8.1 in 2022⁵).

This demographic trend is a cause of current and future concern. The declining fertility rate impacts the structure of the population and thus that of the labour market, and subsequently the competitiveness of the national economy. Additionally, this is a contributing factor to a decline in the long-term sustainability of pensions. When the average fertility rate falls to 1.5, it could mark a critical threshold where a self-reinforcing cycle of declining fertility rates may perpetuate, leading to further decreases in future birth rates.

Table 3: Total Fertility Rate Malta and EU



Source: Eurostat⁶, OECD⁷, and Data Commons⁸

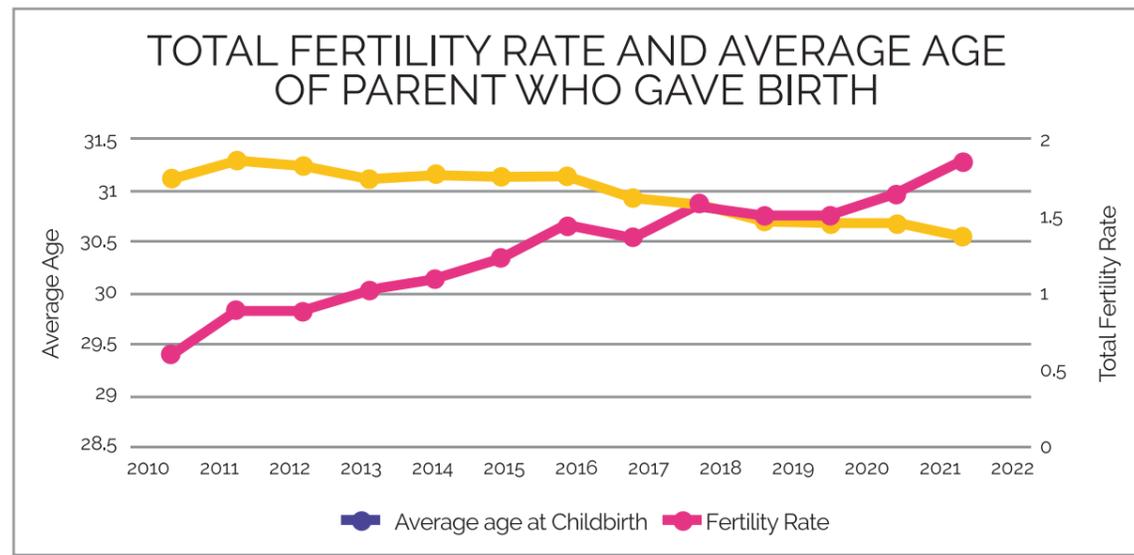
The fertility rate is an important indicator of family well-being as it reflects the difficulties adults have in combining work and family responsibilities, and the broader set of structural limitations they face in having as many children as they say they would like⁹. Despite a shared desire for larger families, with women ideally wanting 2 children and men 1.86 on average (overall ideal: 1.93), several obstacles prevent people from having their desired number of offspring. These challenges include changing social norms about family size and financial difficulties. Data collection commissioned by NCPE¹⁰ shows that 45.5% of

¹ Eurostat defines the Total Fertility Rate as "The mean number of children that would be born alive to a woman during her lifetime if she were to survive and pass through her childbearing years conforming to the fertility rates by age of a given year." Available at: [TPS00199_custom_2661388](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&code=sdg16.6.1) Accessed on 08/01/2024
² OECD (2016), "Fertility", in OECD Factbook 2015-2016: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/factbook-2015-2-en.pdf?expires=1651847879&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=4151CA2262C376ADE67CFDDE655DF791> Accessed on 16/01/2024
³ Eurostat Fertility rates by age. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_frate/default/table?lang=en Accessed: 13/03/2024
⁴ Number of live births per 1,000 total mid-year population
⁵ Eurostat Live births and crude birth rate. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00204/default/table?lang=en> Accessed: 13/03/2024
⁶ Total Fertility Rate. Available at: [tps00199_custom_g369476](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00199_custom_g369476) Accessed: 16/01/24
⁷ Total fertility rates - OECD iLibrary. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-factbook-2015-2016/total-fertility-rates_factbook-2015-table3-en Accessed: 16/01/24
⁸ Malta Demographics - Place Explorer - Data Commons. Available at: <https://datacommons.org/place/country/MLT?category=Demographics> Accessed: 16/01/24
⁹ OECD. Changes in Family Policies and Outcomes: Is there Convergence? Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/5jz13w1xgz-en.pdf?expires=1650278226&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=8ABB58927CC40B49251AD35F3F551B3B> Accessed on 10/02/2024
¹⁰ Perceptions and Attitudes of Women and Men in Malta towards work-life balance with a specific focus on family size Available at: <https://ncpe.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/NCPE-Research-Study-Perceptions-and-Attitudes-of-Women-and-Men-in-Malta-towards-work-life-balance-with-a-specific-focus-on-family-size.pdf> Accessed 21/03/2024

educated women with one child already have no plans for more children, having achieved their ideal family size. Furthermore, a significant portion of the population surveyed (33.9%) struggle financially, living pay check to pay check and unable to plan for the future, which also impacts family planning decisions.

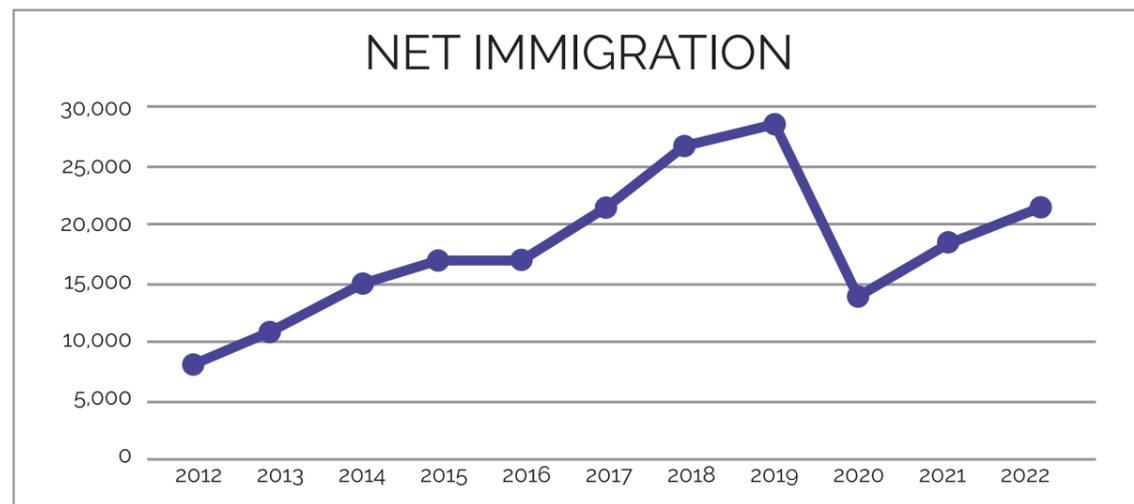
Another noteworthy aspect to emphasise is the average age of parents at the time of giving birth. This factor continued its upward trend and the average age of parents who give birth now stands at 31.2¹ years in 2022. (see Table 4 below)

Table 4: Total Fertility Rate and Average Age of Parent who gave Birth by Year



Source: Eurostat²

2.1.2 Migration



A recent trend that has contributed to the increase of the Maltese population has been migration, mainly by third-country nationals (TCNs), but also EU nationals. This has resulted

¹ Mean age of women at childbirth. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00017_custom_10363347/default/table?lang=en Accessed on 13/03/2024

² Ibid.

in Malta having the highest population density¹ (1 595 people per km²) in the EU. During 2021, the total foreign population² in Malta reached 115,449 with the majority of foreigners being aged between 30 to 39 years (32.4 %) and 68,481 (59.3 %) being males. The immigrant population saw a further increase of 21,798³ persons in 2022. Relative to the size of the resident population, Malta recorded the third highest rate of immigration in the EU at 35 immigrants per 1000 persons.⁴ This resulted in Malta having the second highest rate of migrants as residents in the EU, constituting 20.6% of the resident population. These were distributed as 12% being third country nationals and 8.6% being EU nationals⁵.

Due to this increase in population, the housing sector has experienced a significant impact, leading to a surge in demand for available housing units and subsequently driving up both property prices and rents⁶. This, in turn, has adversely affected affordability⁷.

Value of Properties on the Increase

The average value of property in Malta has increased by 44.45% since 2015 with the average cost of property standing at €227,000 in 2022⁸. Simultaneously, the minimum income required for a household to qualify for a mortgage stood between €25,213 and €30,256 in 2021⁹, compared to €21,040 and €25,247 in 2018. This underscores the escalating challenge of acquiring housing, particularly for young individuals, unless there is government intervention or familial financial support¹⁰. Otherwise, young people might consider to marry or cohabit earlier, or relocating to other localities, to be able to have the required income jointly to afford housing.

2.1.3 Marriage and Divorce

Marriage continues to be an important institution within the local context. The below table 6 shows the number of marriages and divorces since the introduction of divorce legislation in 2011.

In recent years, the number of marriages reached a high of 3,034 in 2016, but have gradually decreased since then, reaching 2,546 in 2022. Conversely, the number of divorces remained relatively stable for some years, with peaks recorded at 502 cases in 2022 and 501 cases in 2023¹¹. Furthermore, there were 111 marital separations in 2022, while 123 separations were registered in 2023.¹²

¹ A growing population until 2020. Demography of Europe. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/digpub/demography_2022/bloc-1a.html?lang=en Accessed on 16/01/2024

² Regional Statistics Malta 2023. Available at: <https://nso.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/Regional-Statistics-Malta-2023-Edition.pdf> Accessed on 16/01/2024

³ NSO World Population Day: 11 July 2023 <https://nso.gov.mt/world-population-day-11-july-2023/> (Accessed: 08/01/2024).

⁴ Migration and Migrant Population Statistics Explained. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics#Migration_flows_-_Immigration_to_the_EU_from_non-member_countries_was_1.9_million_in_2020 Accessed on 16/01/2024

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Central Bank Of Malta. An Assessment Of The Maltese Housing Market. Available at: <https://www.centralbankmalta.org/file.aspx?f=51551#:~:text=The%20relevance%20of%20house%20prices,in%20Malta%20have%20risen%20considerably> Accessed on 05/07/2022

⁷ Housing Authority. The Annual Malta Residential Rental Study-Second Edition. (No date). Available at: <https://rentregistration.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Residential-Rental-Study-2nd-edition.pdf> Accessed on 16/01/2024

⁸ Immigrant Invest <https://imin-malta.com/blog/property-prices/> Accessed on 13/03/24

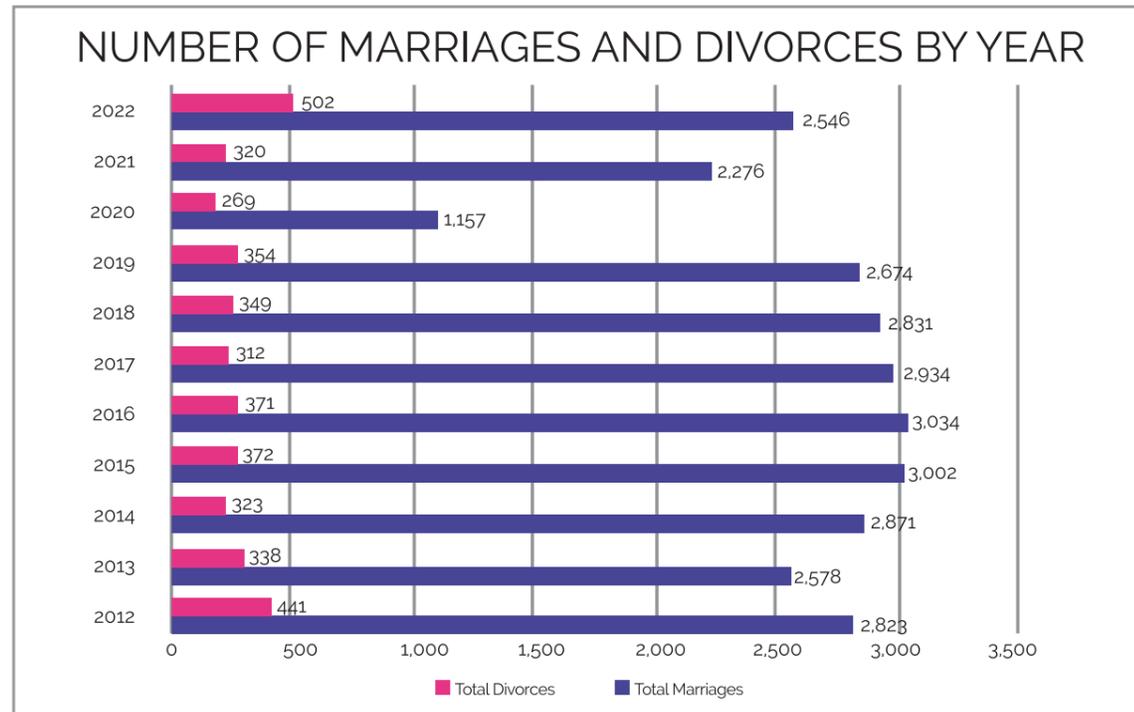
⁹ Minimum Income Required to Purchase a Property: Conceptual Framework and Application to Malta. Research Department, Central Bank of Malta (2022) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363307196_Minimum_Income_Required_to_Purchase_a_Property_Conceptual_Framework_and_Application_to_Malta

¹⁰ Housing Authority. The Annual Malta Residential Rental Study-Second Edition. Available at: <https://rentregistration.mt/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Residential-Rental-Study-2nd-edition.pdf> Accessed on 09/07/2022

¹¹ PO NO 224 Available at: <https://pq.gov.mt/POWeb.nsf/7561f7daddf0609ac1257d1800311f18/c1257d2e0046dfa1c1258aac0047cb48!OpenDocument> Accessed on 13/03/2024

¹² Ibid.

Table 6: Marriage¹ and Divorce²



Source: Eurostat

2.1.4 An Ageing Population

As a result of the socio-economic and medical advances of recent decades, people today are enjoying healthier, longer and more active lives. Malta has one of the highest life expectancies at birth³ (80.4 years for males and 84.6 years for females in 2022) and healthy life years⁴ at birth⁵ (68.9 years for males and 68.5 years for females in 2021) in the EU.

To support disadvantaged cohorts, a number of community services, such as Meals on Wheels, Home Help and Respite Services, amongst others, have been introduced to support independent living in the community, in particular for older adults and people with disability.

Nevertheless, despite this substantial investment, demographic trends such as the accelerated ageing experienced by Maltese society has led to an acute demand for these services. This increased demand may result in an oversubscription, consequently leading to reduced availabilities of these services⁶ if not further expanded. Older persons with increased health dependencies may also pose additional care burdens on families and may also leave an impact on the caring family to balance out care provision and work.

¹ Eurostat- Marriage Indicators. Available at: demo.nind_custom_9374256 Accessed on 16/01/2024

² Eurostat: Divorce Indicators. Available at: demo.ndivind_custom_9374388 Accessed on 16/01/2024

³ Eurostat. Life expectancy. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_R_MLJFEXP_custom_10365444/default/table?lang=en Accessed on 13/03/2024

⁴ Healthy life years is defined as the number of years that a person is expected to continue to live in a healthy condition. It is based on age-specific prevalence (proportions) of the population in healthy and unhealthy condition and age-specific mortality information. A healthy condition is defined as one without limitation in functioning and without disability. Eurostat Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Healthy_life_years_\(HLY\)#:~:text=Healthy%20life%20years%2C%20abbreviated%20as,at%20ages%2050%20and%2065](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Healthy_life_years_(HLY)#:~:text=Healthy%20life%20years%2C%20abbreviated%20as,at%20ages%2050%20and%2065) Accessed on 16/01/2024

⁵ Eurostat: Healthy life years at birth. Available at: tsp00150_custom_9377408 Accessed on 16/01/2024

⁶ 2021 Long-term care in the EU-Country Profiles Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8396> Accessed on 16/01/2024

The demographic ageing trend will pose several challenges in the coming years, in particular with regard to the adequacy and sustainability of the pension system, and increased pressures on the capacity of Health Care and Long-Term Care (LTC) systems.

2.1.5 Pensions

Pensions are the main source of income for older adults. By the end of 2023¹, there were 74,907 people in Malta receiving a retirement pension. Among them, males constituted 68.74% of the total. Additionally, 2,663 individuals were beneficiaries of an invalidity pension, while 18,497 persons were receiving widowhood pensions, with females comprising 97.1% of this group. In 2022 a total of 860 million have been paid in pensions².

In recent years, various initiatives have been implemented in a bid to bolster pensionable income annually; while also ensuring sustainability. Nevertheless, further efforts are required to further improve the adequacy of income during pensionable years.

2.2 A Social Protection System Supporting Families

Malta's Social Protection System is designed to protect individuals, families, and societal well-being against a range of social risks. These risks such as poverty, social exclusion, sickness, disability, old age and unemployment, can dramatically impact the lives of individuals and communities.

The national social protection system provides a multifaceted safety net through a combination of **financial** and **in-kind** benefits, along with essential **social services**. By offering this comprehensive support, the social protection system not only protects disadvantaged individuals and families but also contributes to Malta's social cohesiveness and overall well-being. This holistic approach fosters a stronger, more resilient society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Social Security Benefits (financial benefits)

The Social Security Act (Cap 318) establishes amongst others a scheme of social insurance providing cash benefits for marriage, maternity, childhood, sickness, unemployment, widowhood, orphanhood, retirement, invalidity and industrial accidents or occupational diseases. The following is a graphical representation of the main **Social Security Benefits**³ currently in place that shape the life of the families:

¹ Data provided by the Department of Social Security on 07/03/2024

² Government Expenditure on Social Security Benefits: January-December 2022 Available at: <https://nso.gov.mt/government-expenditure-on-social-security-benefits-january-december-2022/>

³ For further information on each benefit, kindly see Annex 1.

Table 7: Social Security Benefits

Contributory Pensions	Family Benefits	Grants & Bonuses	Non-Contributory Benefits	Medical Assistance
Invalidity Pension	Energy Benefit	Retirement Grant for non-Pensioners	Age Pension	Injury Grant
Retirement Pension	Marriage Grant	Senior Citizen Grant	Carer's Allowance	Injury Benefit
Widowers Pension	Maternity Benefits	Statutory Bonuses (cost of living bonus, six monthly bonus, special weekly bonus)	Disability Assistance	Injury Pension
Survivors Pension	Adoption Benefits	Additional Cost of Living Benefit	Social Assistance	Milk Grant
	Supplementary Allowance		Social Assistance for single parents	Sickness Assistance
			Drug Addict Allowance	Sickness Benefit
			Unemployment Assistant Taper	Leprosy Assistance
				Tuberculosis Assistance

Table 8: Child Related Benefits

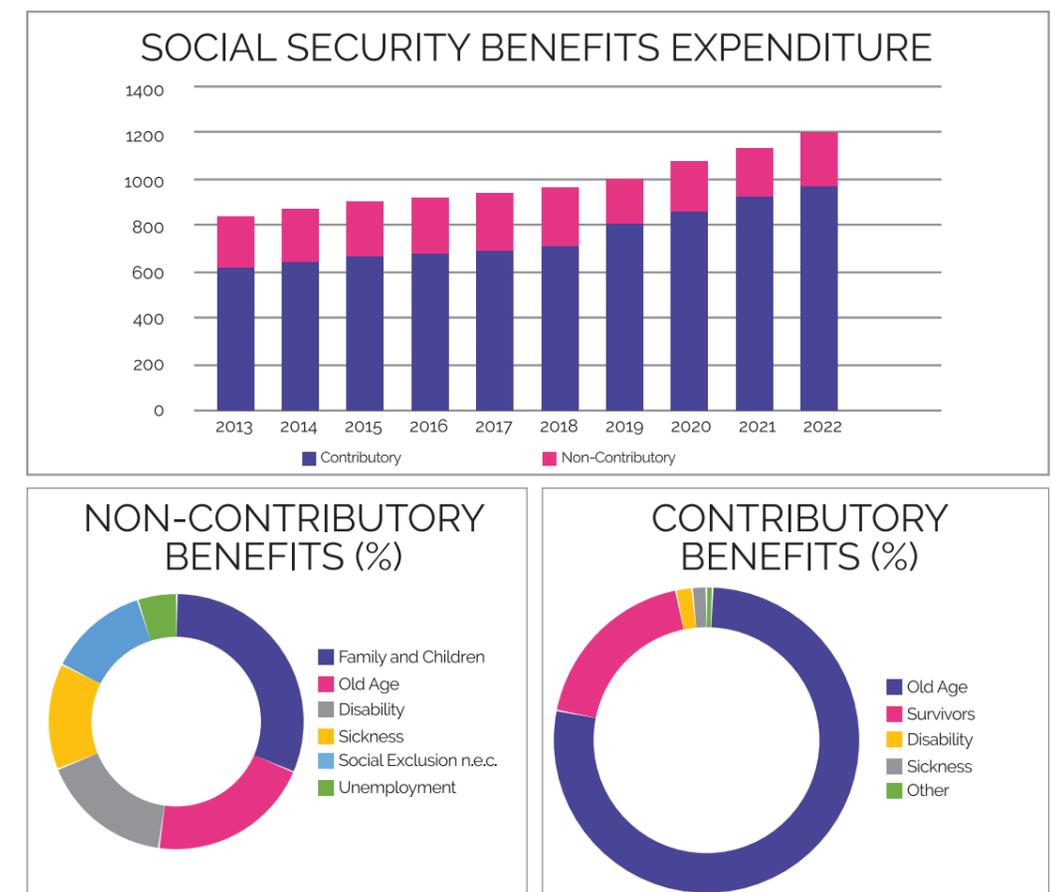
Child Related Benefits
Child Birth/Adoption Bonus
Child in Care Benefit - Foster Care / Residential
Children's Allowance
Foster Child Allowance
Children's Allowance - Child between 16 and 21 years of age
Children's Allowance Supplement
Disabled Child Allowance
Orphan's Allowance
Orphan's Supplementary Allowance

Table 9: Work Incentives and Unemployment Benefits

Work Incentives and Unemployment Benefits	
Unemployment Related	Work Related Benefits
Social Unemployment Benefit	In-Work Benefit
Subsidiary Unemployment Assistance	Tapering of Benefits Scheme
Unemployment Assistance	
Unemployment Benefit	

Spending on Social Security Benefits totalled €1,208.4 million, between January and December 2022, 7.2% higher than the previous year. Higher expenditure was reported for both Contributory and Non-Contributory Benefits. Government spending towards Contributory Benefits amounted to €965.9 million, a 5.6 % rise from 2021. €242.5 million went towards Non-Contributory Benefits, a 14.1 % increase in comparison to the previous year.¹

Table 10: Social Protection Gross Expenditure by Year and Function*



Source: NSO² *The table includes data for Healthcare, Disability and Housing.

¹ NSO Government Expenditure on Social Security Benefits Available at: <https://nso.gov.mt/government-expenditure-on-social-security-benefits-january-december-2022/> Accessed on 12/02/2024
² Ibid.

Social Benefits in-kind (non-financial benefits)

Government provides substantial investment in social benefits in-kind to support disadvantaged persons, promote labour market participation and counter at risk of poverty and social exclusion. These benefits in kind include Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Education, Health Care, Long Term Care and Housing. The Financial Estimates for Budget 2024¹, presented in the table below, outline the investment levels dedicated to providing, operating, and administering² these in-kind benefits.

Table 11: Investment in Benefits in Kind 2024

Benefits in Kind	Total Recurrent Vote
Early Childhood Education and Care (Childcare for all)	€52 Million
Education	€73.9 Million
Health Care	€1 Billion
Long Term Care	€274.2 Million
Social Accomodation	€48.8 Million

Source: MFE, Financial Estimate for Budget 2024

2.2.1 Social Services

Social services are responsible for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of disadvantaged adults and children and provide a wide range of services co-ordinated by social workers, including within the home environment.

At national level, personalised social welfare services are provided by a number of statutory bodies such as the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) which includes different agencies such Sedqa, Aġenzija Appoġġ and the Agency for Community and Therapeutic Services. FSWS also includes other Directorates such as those specifically dedicated for the protection of minors and alternative care. Such services can take many different forms depending on the strengths and needs of the family, but their overarching goal is to help individuals become responsible, and productive members of society.

An example of a measure that has been deemed as an EU best practice³ with a positive impact on families, is the establishment of LEAP centres in various towns across Malta and Gozo. These centres offer an integrated approach through collaboration with other local stakeholders and the provision of multiple services under one roof. These include access to information, professional advice and support in a number of areas, such as employment, access to training and child day care.

¹ Ministry for Finance and Employment. Budget 2024 Financial Estimates. Available at: https://finance.gov.mt/budget24_fe/
² The provision, operation and administration of these benefits in kind require a political, technical and operational capacity to properly function. In this regard, the table provides the Total Recurrent Vote for each Ministry. The Early Childhood Education and Care line item is part of the Ministry for Finance and Employment vote.
³ 10th National Report on the implementation of the European Social Charter submitted by The Government Of Malta Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/16806c2fb2> Accessed on 12/02/2024

2.2.2 Tax Incentives for the Family

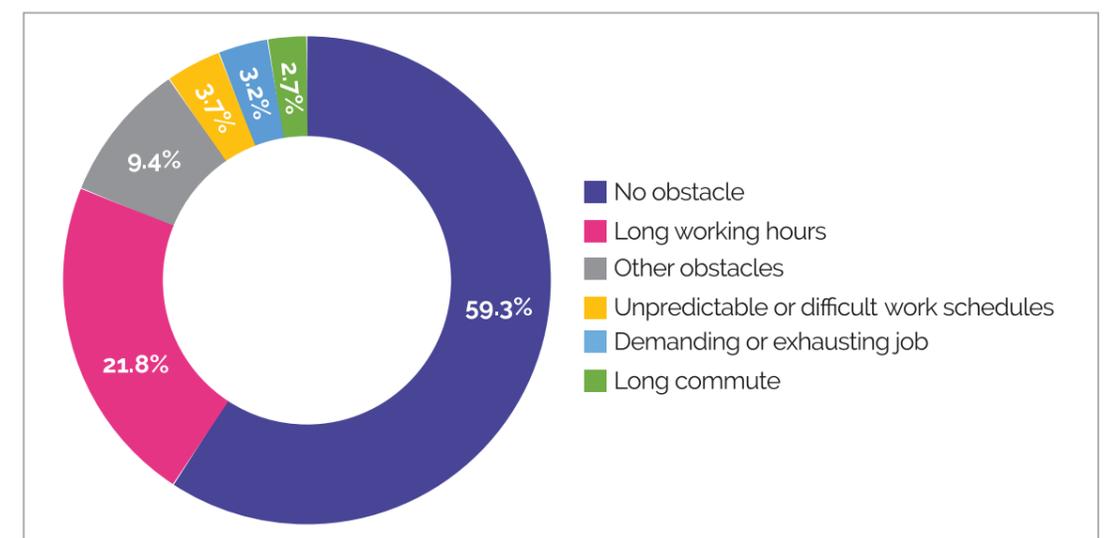
In response to the challenge of insufficient income from employment to lift families out of poverty, several income redistribution measures have been implemented throughout the years. These measures include tax credits, incentives and adjustments to tax brackets tailored to support all families, especially those in disadvantaged situations. These measures not only provide crucial support to families, but they also acted as post-Covid 19 economic incentives helping to mitigate price inflation.

2.3 Labour Market and Work-Life Balance

The economic and material needs of the family must be seen within the context of the changing world of work and the importance of an appropriate work-life balance.

A study carried out by the NSO in 2018 found that the main obstacles in reconciling work and family responsibilities resulted from long working hours (21.8%), followed by other obstacles such as lack of support from employers and colleagues (9.4%), unpredictable or difficult tasks at work (3.7%), a demanding or exhausting job (3.2%) or due to a long commute (2.7%)¹.

Table 12: Main obstacles to reconcile work and family responsibilities²



While a significant majority (83.8%) of workers consider flexible start and finish times important, a slightly lower, but still substantial, proportion (69.1%) believe remote work is essential³. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly boosted teleworking in Malta and between 2019 and 2020, the share of people working remotely more than doubled as employers and employees followed health authority recommendations. This trend continued even after the pandemic subsided. However, data from 2022 reveals a surprising decline, with 62% of employed individuals no longer teleworking compared to just 40% in 2021.⁴ Room for further expansion of remote working arrangements remain, with over 70% of those whose jobs are partially teleworkable and more than 30% of those with

¹ NSO Reconciliation between work and family life, 2018 -available at: <https://nso.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/Reconciliation-between-work-and-family-life-2018.pdf> Accessed 10/02/2024.
² Ibid.
³ Perceptions and Attitudes of Women and Men in Malta towards work-life balance with a specific focus on family size Available at: <https://ncpe.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/NCPE-Research-Study-Perceptions-and-Attitudes-of-Women-and-Men-in-Malta-towards-work-life-balance-with-a-specific-focus-on-family-size.pdf> Accessed 21/03/2024
⁴ Living, Working and COVID-19 e-Survey | European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/data-catalogue/living-working-and-covid-19-e-survey Accessed 10/02/2024.

entirely teleworkable jobs never using such options in 2022¹. This highlights the continued need for promoting telework opportunities and addressing potential barriers to adoption.

Recent trend points towards an overall improvement of employment rates, with a 5.9% increase in 2023². Data from the 2023 Labour Force Survey reveals an 87.1% employment rate for males and a 73.2% rate for females in the third quarter of 2023. While the gender gap persists, it has narrowed down from 17.8% in 2020 to 13.1% in 2022³. This can be attributed to various factors, including increased childcare options, flexible work arrangements, and a growing awareness of gender equality in the workplace.

Despite these encouraging positive developments, this data highlights the need for continued efforts to promote career opportunities and address structural barriers faced by women in part, related to the distribution of caring responsibilities between parents.

2.3.1 Unequal Caring Responsibilities

The family serves as a crucial source of informal support and is primarily responsible for caring children, older persons and other kin requiring care. Work-life balance struggles are widespread, with nearly two-thirds (67.6%) of women and over half (58.6%) of men reporting difficulty managing work and family duties⁴.

Cultural norms often lead to an unequal distribution of these caregiving between the adults in a household. Unequal division of chores persists, with women carrying the heavier load. This is particularly evident when caring for and educating children and grandchildren and taking care of the elderly or people with disabilities. Positive steps like flexitime, telework, and reduced hours, reduce the challenges in achieving work-life balance for the Maltese workforce.

A key issue is the unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities. While some family-friendly measures exist, women are significantly more likely to utilise them, with 97.6% vs 2.4% of males availing themselves of parental leaves and 97.% vs 2.8% of males⁵ opting for a career break. This perpetuates the burden on mothers and hinders equal career opportunities. Additionally, the dominance of microenterprises in the private sector, which are not obligated to offer such options, creates a gap in support for a large portion of the workforce.⁶ These factors contribute to high stress levels among Maltese workers struggling to manage work, family, and personal well-being.

Data⁷ also shows that only 1% of men reported handling most childcare, and 5% reported taking care of most housework. This imbalance impacts family planning, with nearly half of women agreeing that unfair sharing of childcare (46.1%) and housework (46.9%) influences decisions about having children. Notably, young adults aged 19-24 are especially sensitive to this issue, with 85% agreeing with the statement that a mother who is not supported by her partner is justified in deciding not to have a child or another child.

1 Round of the Living, Working and COVID-19 e-Survey: Living in a New Era of Uncertainty | European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2022/fifth-round-living-working-and-covid-19-e-survey-living-new-era-uncertainty Accessed 10/02/2024.

2 Labour Force Survey: Q4:2023 nso.gov.mt/labour-force-survey-q3-2023/ Accessed 10/02/2024.

3 Eurostat Gender Employment Gap, ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tesem060_custom_g795183/default/table?lang=en Accessed 10/02/2024.

4 Perceptions and Attitudes of Women and Men in Malta towards work-life balance with a specific focus on family size Available at: <https://ncpe.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/NCPE-Research-Study-Perceptions-and-Attitudes-of-Women-and-Men-in-Malta-towards-work-life-balance-with-a-specific-focus-on-family-size.pdf> Accessed 21/03/2024

5 NCPE Work Life Balance Measure in Malta. Available at <https://ncpe.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Work-Life-Balance-Measures-in-Malta-NCPE-Commissioner-Ms-Renee-Laiviera.pdf> Accessed on 21/03/24

6 Abela, A., Sammut Scerri, C., & Grech Lanfranco, I. (2020). A Scoping Review of the current Family-friendly practices in Malta; with Recommendations for Policy and Research post Covid-19

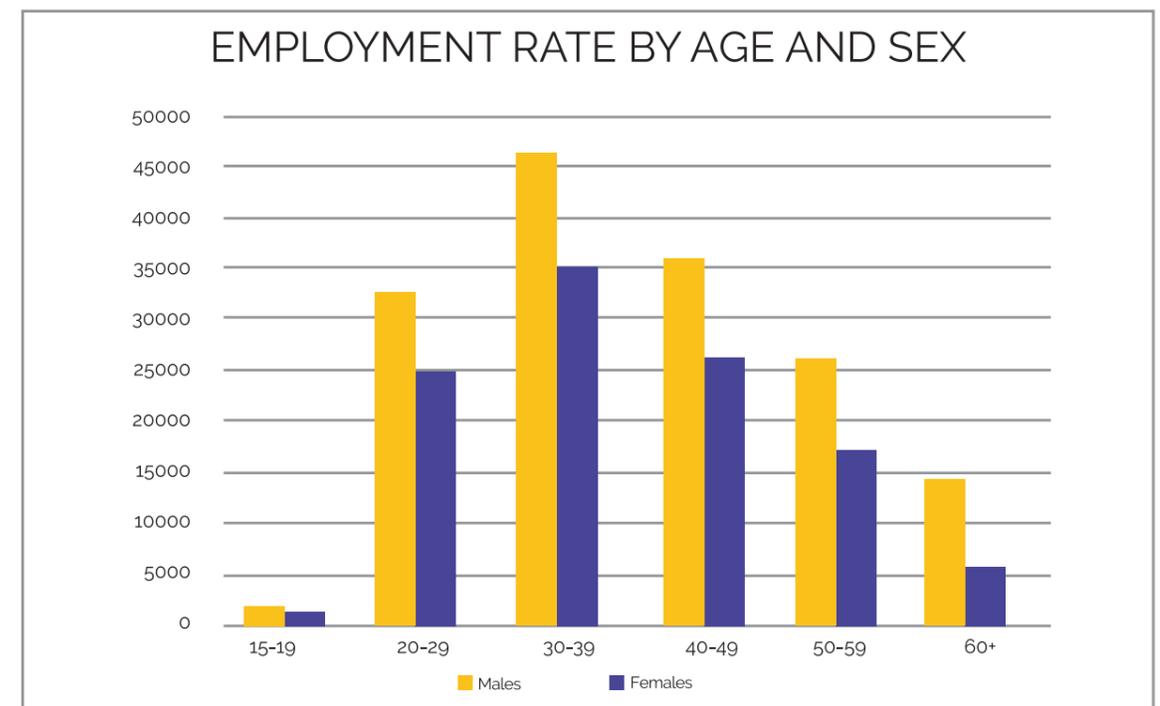
7 NCPE Work Life Balance Measure in Malta. Available at <https://ncpe.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Work-Life-Balance-Measures-in-Malta-NCPE-Commissioner-Ms-Renee-Laiviera.pdf> Accessed on 21/03/24

In 2023 Malta ranked 24th in the EU in the Time domain of the Gender Equality Index. This domain evaluates the distribution of time between economic, care, and social activities, highlighting the need for better work-life balance, especially with persistent inequality in the distribution of paid and unpaid work between women and men. This inequality contributes to broader gender disparities in society and the labour market, underscoring the interconnectedness of the time domain with other aspects of gender equality¹.

Females in the Labour Market

While female employment has increased for all age cohorts men still significantly outnumber women in the labour market in all age groups (as per below Table 14²). This persistent gender employment gap can be attributed to several factors, with unequal parenting responsibilities playing a major role. Although decreasing rapidly over the past decade, Malta's gender employment gap remains among the highest in the EU, with a difference of 13.1 percentage points compared to the EU average of 10.6 percentage points in 2022. This gap widens as individuals age, and consequently, Malta also exhibits one of the widest gender pension gaps in the EU³, with Maltese women receiving pensions that are 46% smaller than those of Maltese men, compared to the EU average gap of 25.9% in 2021.⁴

Table 13: Employment Rate by Age and Sex⁵



1 EIGE Europa – Malta Gender Quality Index 2023 Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/modules/custom/eige_gei/app/content/downloads/factsheets/MT_2023_factsheet.pdf Accessed on 12/02/2024

2 NSO: Labour Force Survey: Q1/2022 Available at: [News2022_104.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/news/2022_104.pdf) (gov.mt) Accessed on 05/07/2022

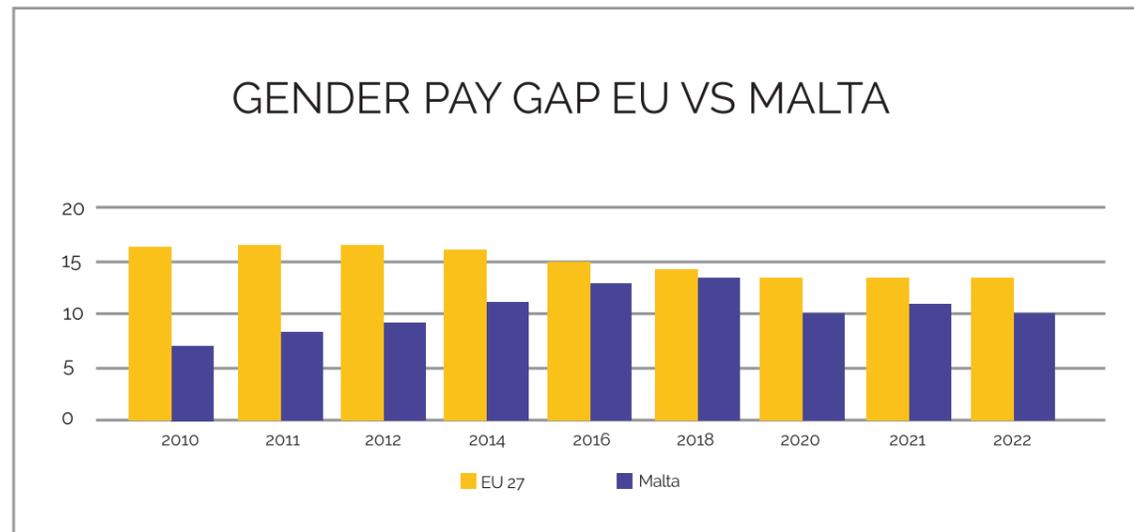
3 The high gender pension gap in the age group 65-79 can be attributed to the introduction of several measures by Government in the past years aimed (such as the -Contributory Retirement Grant) at increasing the number of women who qualify for a contributory retirement pension, and therefore a transitional issue. In the main the gender pension gap is a result of an increase in the number of women becoming eligible for a contributory retirement pension (without such measures they would not have been eligible and therefore the gender gap would not have widened).

4 2023 Country Report – Malta https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/50f0b280-0035-4f28-8c35-f2d6db91cca_en?filename=ip242_en.pdf Accessed 11/02/2024.

5 Source <https://nso.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/Chapter-5-vol3.xlsx> Accessed on 10/02/2024

Women often experience career interruptions due to childcare responsibilities, leading to lower job continuity and career progression compared to men. This, coupled with the existing gender pay gap, highlights the distinct life experiences of working women. They often shoulder a disproportionate share of family and domestic tasks, balancing work with childcare for children and other dependents. This frequently leads to choosing part-time work to manage these competing demands. While Malta boasts a gender pay gap that is below the EU average, this remains a significant challenge. Recent years have seen a decreasing gender pay gap, with definite signs of improvement, however closing the gender pay gap completely requires dedicated efforts.

Table 14: Gender Pay Gap¹

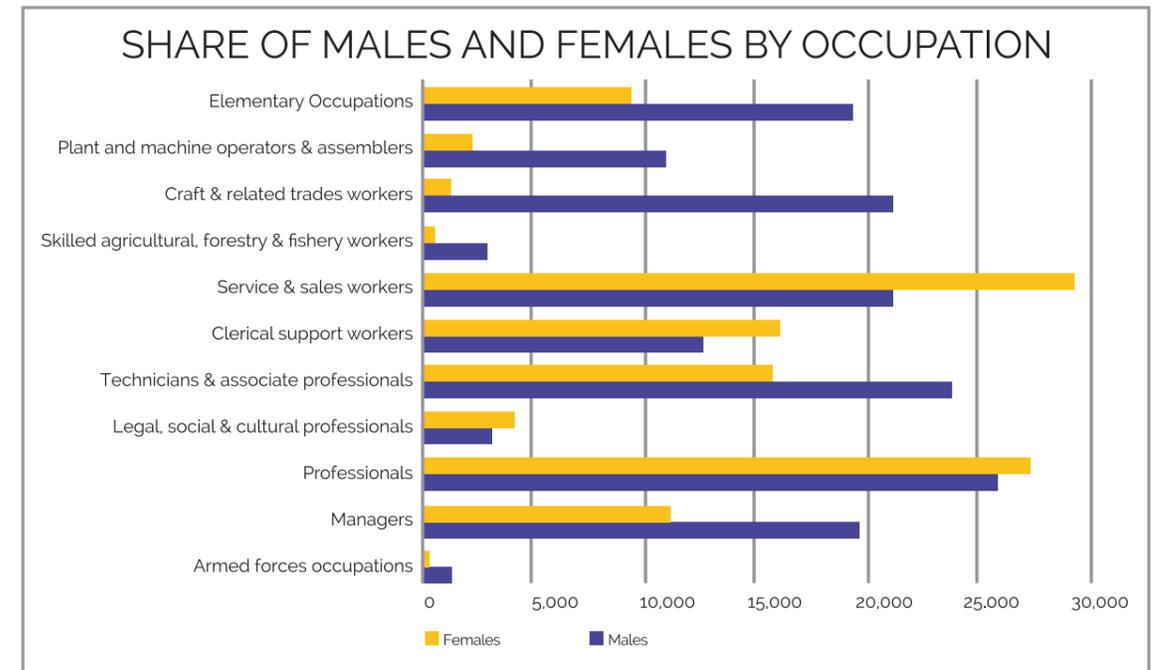


The gender pay gap is a result of multiple socio-economic and cultural factors. Females and Males tend to work in different economic sectors, with women overrepresented in sectors like care, health, and education. Females often occupy lower-level positions when compared to men, being significantly underrepresented in top leadership positions. Besides women bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid work compared to men, which might affect their career choices and prospects. Furthermore, pay discrimination continues to be a concern, with instances where women are paid less than men for equivalent work, despite legal provisions for equal pay.²

The below disaggregation of employment sectors by sex for each job occupation. The graph shows that more females were employed as sales assistants (58% Females as opposed to 42% Males) or in clerical occupations (57% Females as opposed to 43% Males), while more men work as managers (63.8% Males vs 36.2% Females) and as technician and associate professionals (59.6% Males vs 40.4% Females).

¹ Eurostat Gender pay gap in unadjusted form. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_20_custom_10527863/default/table?lang=en Accessed on 21/03/2024
² "The Gender Pay Gap Situation in the EU." European Commission, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/equal-pay/gender-pay-gap-situation-eu_en Accessed 10/02/2024.

Table 15: Share of males and females by occupation¹



A way to mitigate these gaps is by further strengthening work-life balance measures as women are using flexible work arrangements to juggle work and family life more than men². Work-life balance initiatives can help to boost women's employment and close the gender pay gap, but only if both women and men have support to take advantage of these measures.

To entice more female participation in the labour market Government introduced free Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for all. This measure is supported by the 'Breakfast Club Scheme' and the 'Klabb 3-16' programmes that are offered before and after school hours respectively. These initiatives were intended to eliminate both the financial and non-financial barriers linked to childcare that placed constraints on women's ability to seek employment opportunities. The introduction of these services has provided a necessary support to balance work and family responsibilities, and thus resulted in a pronounced increase in the female employment rate, thereby increasing women's financial resources.

2.3.2 Family Leaves

In 2022 legal amendments³ in relation to the paternity leave, parental leave and carer's leave have been introduced to better support a work-life balance, encourage a more equal sharing of parental leave, and address women's underrepresentation in the labour market.

With the recent amendments paternity leave has been increased to 10 days and will be fully paid, carers' leave to support family relatives has been set at five days without pay and paid parental leave has been implemented for a duration of two months (at sick leave

¹ Source <https://nso.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/Chapter-5-vol3.xlsx> Accessed on 10/02/2024
² European Institute for Gender Equality. Tackling the gender pay gap: not without a better work-life balance. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/tackling-gender-pay-gap-not-without-better-work-life-balance> Accessed on 12/02/2024
³ Press Release By The Parliamentary Secretariat For Social Dialogue Enhancing the quality of life: Introducing new rights Available at: <https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/DOI/Press%20Releases/Pages/2022/07/12/pr220943en.aspx> Accessed on 10/02/2024

payment rate) with the option to extend for an additional two months without payment. Additionally, parents of children under eight years old have the right to request flexible work arrangements. These amendments have the sole aim of making life easier for families, helping them to balance paid work, private life and caring responsibilities.

2.4 Families Facing Challenging Situations & Disadvantaged Families

Through the provision of professional social support Government sustains families facing problematic situations. Families facing problematic situations are characterised by certain risk factors which may include certain conditions such as:

2.4.1 Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion

In recent years, Malta has seen a declining trend in the At-Risk-Of-Poverty and Social Exclusion (AROPE) rate, dropping from 22.2% in 2015 falling to 20.1% in 2022.¹ This rate is lower than the EU average of 21.6% that was registered in 2022. When it comes to well-being, social and health aspects, persons who were at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion reported lower average scores regarding their overall life, financial situation, current job, and personal relationships satisfaction, and higher average scores regarding their time use satisfaction, when compared to their counterparts².

Females 21.3% were found to be more at risk of poverty and social exclusion, versus 18.9% of males. A geographical disaggregation of households³ who are at risk of poverty and social exclusion notes that the Northern Harbour district registered the highest rate of at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) persons in 2022, at 25.7%. The lowest AROPE rate was recorded in the Southern Eastern district, at 11.5%.



¹ Eurostat: Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex Available at: ilc.peps01n_custom_g800518 Accessed 10/02/2024.
² EU-SILC 2022: Well-being, Social and Health Indicators <https://nso.gov.mt/eu-silc-2022-well-being-social-and-health-indicators/>
³ NSO. EU-SILC 2022: Salient Indicators Available at: <https://nso.gov.mt/eu-silc-2022-salient-indicators/> Accessed 10/02/2024.

Intergenerational Poverty

The 'Intergenerational Poverty Cycle' is the term used to refer to poverty and social exclusion that persist from one generation to the next, presents a challenge to economic prosperity. Those who are born into poverty face significant challenges in overcoming socioeconomic barriers throughout their lives. This viscous cycle traps families in a web of disadvantages, leading to higher poverty rates across generations and increases costs for the welfare state, thus hindering both social and economic resilience. Combatting this phenomenon becomes a priority in creating a more equitable society whereby through the prevention of poverty, everyone would have the chance to thrive.

Children growing up in poverty and social exclusion are less likely to do well in school, enjoy good health and realise their full potential later in life¹. This puts them at a higher risk of becoming unemployed, poor and socially excluded, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty². Overall, the share of children aged 0-17 at risk of poverty or social exclusion declined to 23.1% in 2022, below the EU average of 24.7%³. Some groups of children are at greater risk of poverty or social exclusion, including those in low-skilled households 40.4%⁴.

Socio-economic background strongly influences student outcomes, significantly increasing the risk of future poverty and social exclusion⁵. A high gap (25.4 pps) in achievements of students from low and high socio-economic status can also be observed in Malta⁶. Around 51% of students from the bottom socio-economic quartile⁷ fail to achieve a minimum level of skills in reading (compared to 34.8% at EU level). This is more than twice the rate of underachievement within the top quartile - although the underachievement rate for the top quartile is also high (24.3% vs EU 9.3%)⁸. In addition, educational outcomes vary according to the type of schools attended, with private schools outperforming public schools by more than two school years in terms of educational outcomes⁹.

The **National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee 2022-2030**¹⁰ aims to prevent the social exclusion of disadvantaged children by guaranteeing access to a number of essential services, thereby disrupting cycles of intergenerational poverty and promoting equality of opportunity. Through the investment of €145Million over 5 years, the National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee aims to lead to an improved access to a number of already established services, such as early childhood education and care, quality education and school-based educational activities, healthcare and good nutrition, social protection and adequate accommodation. The recently published monitoring report registered declining AROPE rates among children in single-parent households, from 51.5% to 43.3% between 2020 and 2022, along with reductions in AROPE rates for children in low-income households.¹¹

¹ Tackling child poverty together. Red Cross EU Office <https://redcross.eu/latest-news/tackling-child-poverty-together>
² Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Children_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion Accessed on 12/02/2024
³ Eurostat Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex ilc.peps01n_custom_g806064 Accessed 11/02/2024.
⁴ At-risk-of-poverty rate for children by educational attainment level of their parents (population aged 0 to 17 years) ilc.li60_custom_g807418 Accessed 11/02/2024.
⁵ Malta Country Report 2022 https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/2022-european-semester-country-report-malta_en.pdf Accessed 11/02/2024
⁶ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Education and training monitor 2023 - Malta, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023 <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/865175> Accessed on 9/04/2024
⁷ "Socio-economic quartile" divides a population into four equal groups based on their socio-economic status, such as income or education level, to analyze disparities and plan interventions. The lowest quartile represents the least affluent, while the highest quartile represents the most affluent. A quartile is a statistical measure dividing a dataset into four equal parts, each representing 25% of the data.
⁸ Malta Country Report 2022 https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/2022-european-semester-country-report-malta_en.pdf Accessed 11/02/2024
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ MSPC. National Action for a Child Guarantee 2022-2030 Available at: <https://familja.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/National-Action-Plan-Child-Guarantee-EN-1.pdf> Accessed on 11/02/2024
¹¹ NAP Report 2023 <https://familja.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NAP-report-2023.pdf> Accessed on 11/02/2024

Minimum Incomes

Adequate minimum wages are pivotal in promoting economic and social progress. The role of minimum wages becomes even more important during economic downturns. Prices for food have substantially increased in 2023. A family of four (two adults + two children) now spends €8,634, up from €7,121.38, while a single parent with two dependent children now needs €6,509.88, up from €5,167.82. Similarly, an elderly couple would require €4,347.36, up from €3,374.84.¹ In 2022, the at-risk-of-poverty threshold (ARPT) was estimated at €10,893². This is 6.6% higher than the previous year, which means it is getting more expensive to live comfortably.

Ensuring that workers earn adequate wages is essential to guarantee adequate working and living conditions, as well as to build fair and resilient economies. In order to alleviate minimum incomes, Government introduced the In-Work Benefit whose aim is to assist couples and single parents who are in a gainful occupation and have children under the age of 23 years, who are still dependent and living with them. In 2020³, €6.5 million was provided to 5,337 families, increasing to €7 million in 2021 with 7,246 families benefitting, and to 24,611 families in 2022 with €13.7 million allocated⁴. Malta is just below the EU average for Full-time In-work Poverty, having maintained a stable level, at 6.8% against the 7.1% in the EU in 2022. Malta also remains below the EU average for Part-Time In-work poverty, with a peak of 16.1% in 2015, falling to 12.3% in 2022.⁵

With the aim of assisting families at risk of poverty when the inflation rate is higher than normal, the Government also introduced the Additional COLA Mechanism in 2023⁶. In 2024, the Additional Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) was implemented through a slightly revised mechanism to further mitigate the impact of rising inflation on living expenses. In 2024, approximately 95,000 households (149,000 people) have benefited from an extra COLA boost provided by the Government. The allocation for this benefit amounts to €26 million in 2024.

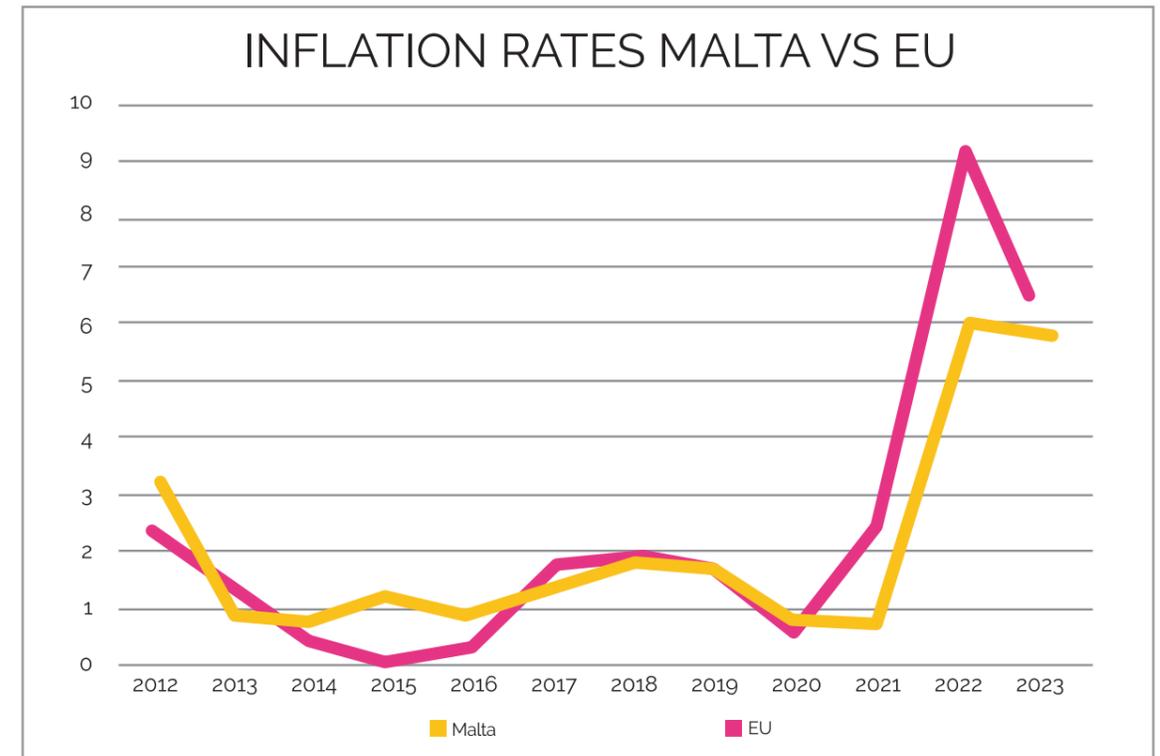
2.4.1.1 Price affordability

For many households, financial and economic challenges in conjunction with rising inflation, pose a significant hurdle. Higher prices can erode the value of actual wages and savings, leaving households with lower disposable income. These effects are not felt equally, with low and middle-income households tending to be more susceptible to high inflation rates than wealthier households.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic, supply constraints, geo-political events, and a robust economy resulted in record inflation throughout 2022. This inflation, especially in food items and consumer goods, resulted in a lack of affordability, that impacted families negatively⁷.

According to Eurostat data¹ the EU inflation rate which peaked at 9.2% in 2022, declined to 6.4% in 2023. On the other hand, Malta had the one of the lowest inflation rates in the EU, registering a peak of 6.1% in 2022, further decreasing to 5.6% in 2023.

Table 16: All-items HICP in Malta and the euro area



To combat inflation, in 2024 Government launched a new price stability scheme to incentivise food selling businesses to reduce the prices of essential food. More than 400 shops enrolled into the price stability scheme on 15 staple food categories covering around 450 products. The reduction involved a minimum of 15% on the recommended retail price (RRP) set by importers and producers on 31 October 2023. This initiative seeks to have a direct impact on inflation by making essential foods more affordable for consumers.

2.4.2 Single Parents and Teenage Mothers

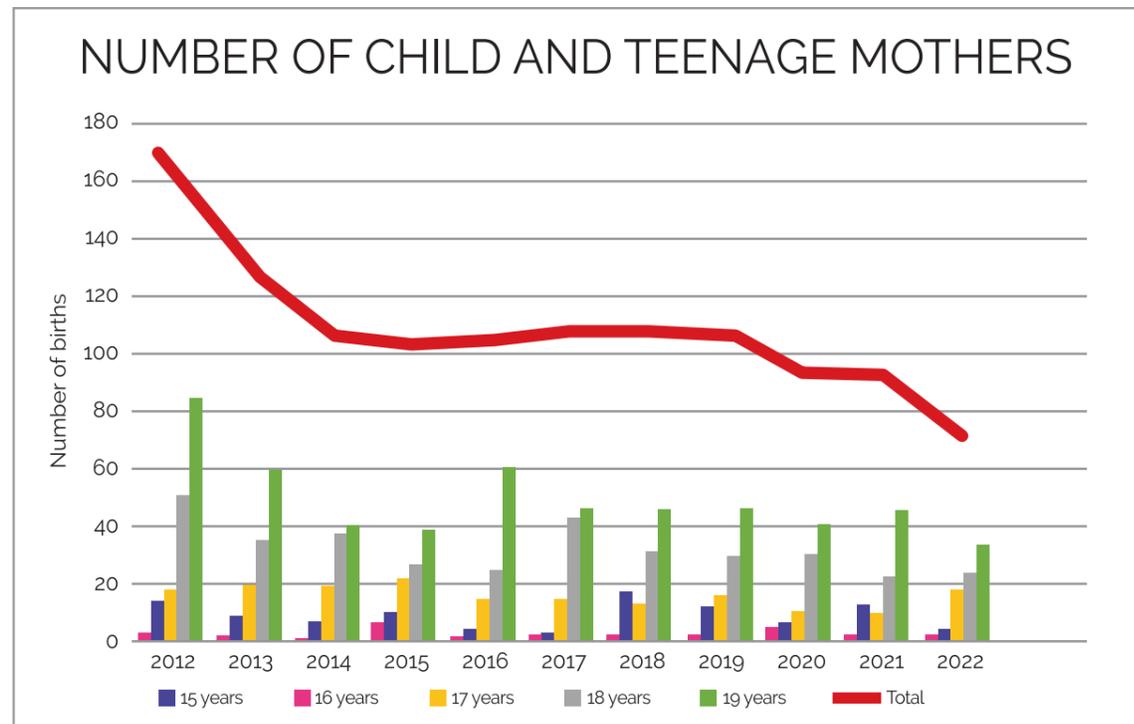
Single parent families have increased in Maltese society. In 2021² a total of 6,378 households were comprised of single parents with one or more dependent children, an increase of 922 households compared to ten years before. The total "mothers" in Malta totalled 139,223, among which, 14,491 were single. Also to note, the rate of children born outside of marriage in Malta has rapidly increased, from 10.6% in the year 2000, to 31.8% in 2018³.

¹ Eurostat HICP – Inflation Rate https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/teco0118_custom_g813235/default/table?lang=en Accessed 11/02/2024. NSO Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP): June 2022 Available at: https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2022/07/News2022_124.pdf Accessed on 21/07/2022
² Census of Population and Housing 2021: Final Report: Health, education, employment and other characteristics (Volume 3) Available at: https://nso.gov.mt/themes_publications/census-of-population-and-housing-2021-final-report-health-education-employment-and-other-characteristics/ Accessed on 21/3/24
³ Eurostat. Are more babies born inside or outside marriage? Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20180416-1> Accessed on 12/02/2024

Teenage Mothers

While the number of all births has increased from 3,898 in 2010 to 4,204 in 2023, the percentage thereof of child and teenage mothers has fallen from 5.2% in 2010 to 1.85% in 2022 of all births¹ (Table 18 below refers). This may be due to a number of factors, but particularly the greater awareness of the challenges faced, and increased knowledge of sexual education. Although the numbers are on the decrease it is to be highlighted that the remaining teenage and child parents face increased challenges to raise their children, resulting in socio-economic, education and health outcomes that are disproportionately inferior to other cohorts. This impacts upon their life chances and leads to a higher risk of inter-generational transmission of poverty and social exclusion.

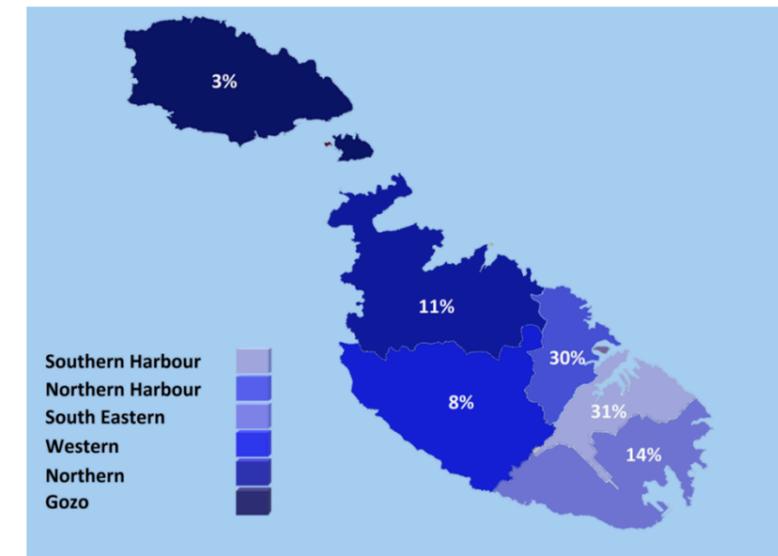
Table 17: Number of Child and Teenage Mothers (Source: Eurostat)



2.4.3 Addictions

Addiction doesn't just impact the substance user; it sends shockwaves through the entire family dynamic. From parental neglect or abuse to financial strain, domestic violence, and even exposure to crime, the consequences can be severe and wide-ranging. Additionally, feelings of shame and stigma can further isolate and burden family members. To this effect, addiction treatment services need to adopt a holistic approach that goes beyond the individual. This means incorporating therapy including family therapy and support groups, addressing emotional trauma and co-dependency, and providing resources for managing practical challenges like finances and childcare.

¹ Live births by mother's year of birth (age reached) and birth order Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2908/DEMO.FORDAGER> Accessed on 12/02/2024



In 2022, 1,927 individuals sought treatment for substance misuse¹. This was the largest number reported over time. The majority of treatment service users continues to be predominantly male (81%) while females accounted for the remaining 19%. The most common age cohort in treatment was the individuals between the age of 35 and 39, and 40 to 44, with 369 and 380 individuals, respectively. This marks a shift from previous years when the predominant age was often reported to be the 25 to 29 age brackets. This figure may be indicative of an ageing population within those individuals in treatment, particularly individuals who use heroin as their primary drug. Indeed, a total of 1,307 individuals who received treatment in 2023 were over 35. This demonstrates that older users comprised 68% of those who received treatment².

The majority of individuals in treatment in 2022 reported coming from the Southern Harbour area (31%) and the Northern Harbour Area (30%). From the individuals in treatment, 14% resided in the South East of Malta, 11% resided in the Northern region, 8% resided in the Western region, and 3% in Gozo. These figures are very similar to the latest figures on record for the past year, where on average, 31% reported coming from the Southern Harbour region, 31% from the Northern Harbour region, 15% reported coming from the South-eastern region, 12% from the Northern region, 8% from the Western region, while a further 2% reported coming from Gozo³.

Family-based treatments have demonstrated better recovery rates over individual or group-based treatments. Treating the individual without family involvement may limit the effectiveness of treatment as it ignores the impact of addictions on the rest of the family, while not acknowledging that the family may be a potential system of support for change⁴. However, one should acknowledge that while family support is desirable in a treatment context, a number of individuals may not have a sound family support network to support them in their treatment journey.

¹ The Drug Situation and Responses in Malta: Key Issues 2023

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Malta National Focal Point on Drugs and Drug Addiction. 06th July 2022. Personal Communication

2.4.4 Domestic Violence

Beyond physical aggression and abuse, domestic violence encompasses controlling, domineering, and humiliating behaviours, casts a long shadow on family life. The impact and consequences of domestic abuse can be devastating and lifelong. Children exposed to domestic violence are likely to experience it themselves, perpetuating a harmful cycle¹. Thus, it is essential that victims recognise the warning signs, seek help, learn to protect themselves and avoid from perpetuating the cycle of violence from one relationship to another. The reported cases to the police have unfortunately risen, increasing from 1,741 in 2021 to 1,828 in 2022 and reaching 2,071 in 2023², highlighting a pressing need for intervention and support.

Creating domestic violence free families is crucial for breaking the harmful cycle of abuse that can have lifelong consequences. Beyond physical harm, domestic violence can deeply affect family dynamics with controlling and humiliating behaviours. This cycle often extends to the next generation, with children exposed to such violence more likely to perpetuate it. Recognising warning signs, seeking help, and learning to protect oneself are vital steps to prevent the cycle of violence from one relationship to another. As reported cases continue to rise, reaching 2,071 in 2023, intervention and support are urgently needed to create safe and healthy family environments.

2.4.5 Health Related Issues

Malta's National Health Service provides good access to care to the population, and levels of unmet needs for care are among the lowest in the EU³. However, Malta's healthcare system faces the challenge of increasing demand from a rapidly increasing and ageing population. Other non-demographic factors such as the emergence of new (often expensive) treatments also have an impact on the health care system. Within such a context of rising demand for healthcare resources, ensuring timely access to high quality healthcare — whilst also guaranteeing the financial sustainability of health systems — is a challenge which requires increased efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of health systems. Waiting lists for inpatient care for a number of procedures have been reduced substantially in recent years⁴. Additionally, waiting lists in the Outpatients Department, both in Malta and in Gozo had been significantly reduced by January 2024⁵. In urgent cases, persons requiring care are scheduled to see the specialist either on the same day or at the next available outpatient clinic.

Self-reported good health is high, but sizeable income-based inequalities in health status persist⁶. More men (76 %) reported being in good health than women (70%)⁷. In addition, 89% of the Maltese population in the highest income quintile⁸ reported being in good

¹ Sammut Scerri, C., Grech Lanfranco, I., Pace, L. & Borg, M. (2022). Safety in childhood : a prevalence study of childhood abuse experiences in Malta a quantitative research study. Malta: University of Malta. Department of Child and Family Studies.

² PQ 185 Available at <https://pq.gov.mt/POWeb.nsf/06d013e9fgab0283c12568f50054014f/c1257d2e0046dfac1258ab50042b18a?OpenDocument> Accessed on 12/02/2024

³ OECD State of Health in the EU- Malta-Country Health Profile 2023

Available at: www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/2a821e8a-en.pdf?expires=1707729917&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=7ABFE38B8F314693A835709B0ED1FBAA Accessed on 12/02/2024

⁴ ESPN. ESPN Thematic Report on Inequalities in access to healthcare Malta 2018 Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20354&langId=en> Accessed on 22/07/2022

⁵ PQ No 15245 Sitting 202 - 31/01/2024 <https://pq.gov.mt/POWeb.nsf/06d013e9fgab0283c12568f50054014f/c1257d2e0046dfac1258ab5003fe6f6?OpenDocument> Accessed on 12/02/2024

⁶ OECD State of Health in the EU- Malta-Country Health Profile 2023

Available at: www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/2a821e8a-en.pdf?expires=1707729917&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=7ABFE38B8F314693A835709B0ED1FBAA Accessed on 12/02/2024

⁷ "Gender Equality Index: 2023: Health: Family: MT." European Institute for Gender Equality, eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2023/domain/health/MT/family. Accessed 12 Feb. 2024.

⁸ Income quintiles are a statistical method used to divide a population into five equal groups based on their income levels. Each quintile represents 20% of the population, with the first quintile containing the lowest earners and the fifth quintile containing the highest earners.

health, compared with 58 % of those in the lowest income quintile¹. Deaths from cardiovascular disease and cancer have declined substantially in recent decades, but they still account for more than half of all deaths in Malta. Malta also had one of the highest rates of treatable mortality from diabetes in the EU, ranking fourth (7 %)². Over one third of all deaths in Malta were driven by behavioural risk factors in 2019. Dietary risks and smoking are major contributors to mortality. Malta has the highest rates of overweight and obesity among adults and adolescents in the EU, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles in a bid to combat this has been a major government priority in the last decade. Poor diets and physical inactivity contribute to high levels of obesity in the country, furthermore, 21% of adults reported smoking in Malta, versus 19% in the EU³.

Families facing health related issues may find themselves in disadvantaged situations, especially families facing long term health conditions. While Malta's free healthcare system is a valuable resource, additional support in areas like coping with emotional stress, further assistance to access to specialised equipment, constant care, and adapted housing

could further improve the quality of life for families facing long-term health conditions, as the specific challenges vary for each family. This holds particular significance when families include persons with disabilities.

Persons with Disability

Another group with intensified care responsibilities are the families of people with disability (PWD). In conformity with global standards and practices, there has been a move towards care in the community and away from institutionalisation.

In recent years, Government has established a strong system of formal health-related support for PWD. In particular, the Support Community Services provide community-based support to persons with disability and their families. The overarching aim of such services is to enhance the quality of life of both the service user and his or her guardians while assisting persons with disability to lead an independent life in the community. Based upon an assessment and intervention plan, the personalised services are targeted according to one's abilities and limitations. Furthermore, to support the families of PWD, several support measures such as respite centres, day care centres and financial benefits have been introduced to mitigate these caring responsibilities.

People with disabilities still face significant challenges despite efforts to enhance their rights and opportunities. Issues like intersectionality, deinstitutionalisation, and digital innovation persist alongside obstacles in inclusive employment and education. Accessible housing remains a concern, and family life presents hurdles in child-rearing and accessing social protection. Additionally, accessibility issues extend to sports facilities and transportation, impacting various aspects of daily life. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to ensure equitable opportunities and societal integration.⁴

¹ OECD State of Health in the EU- Malta-Country Health Profile 2023

Available at: www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/2a821e8a-en.pdf?expires=1707729917&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=7ABFE38B8F314693A835709B0ED1FBAA Accessed on 12/02/2024

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ CRPD Annual Report 2022 Available at: www.crpdm.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CRPD-Annual-Report-2022-EN.pdf Accessed 10/02/2024.



PRIORITY ONE: SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR FAMILIES

To further provide and enhance adequate support and services to families in disadvantaged situations. Families with member who have specific needs require additional support.

By improving the overall social wellbeing, all families are to have the necessary opportunities and assistance to thrive.

PRIORITY 1: SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR FAMILIES

Social inequality is the condition where people have unequal access to valued resources, services and positions in society¹. In a society marked by diverse realities and challenges, the pursuit of social justice for families stands as a paramount goal. This chapter of the proposed Social Plan for the Families underscores the imperative of addressing social inequalities to enhance the well-being and life chances of families in disadvantaged situations.

Policy Direction

The cornerstone of the efforts lies in further extending comprehensive support and services to disadvantaged families. Recognising the unique needs of families with members who have specific needs, Government will remain committed to strengthen further access to essential resources and assistance.

At the heart of this approach is a commitment to empowering groups in difficult situations within society. By addressing their unique needs, the plan strives to foster a culture of inclusivity and belonging both within the family and within the community. Through targeted support programmes and advocacy efforts, it aims to further equip these families with the tools and resources they need to overcome adversity and achieve their full potential.

Building a just and equitable society requires ensuring equal opportunities for all families, regardless of their socio-economic status, sexual orientation or background. To this end, it is crucial to further ensure a level playing field where every family has the chance to succeed. This will be primarily achieved through continued investment in education, employment, and social services, thereby narrowing any existing gaps.

It is also important to recognise the significant role of informal support provided by communities. Strengthening community bonds and resources will not only enhance the resilience of families but also create a more inclusive and supportive environment. This investment in informal support systems will empower families with a diverse range of resources and networks to tap into, fostering a sense of belonging and collective well-being. Through collaboration between formal services and community-based initiatives, a more holistic approach to family support will be achieved, ensuring that families receive comprehensive assistance tailored to their unique needs and circumstances.

Achieving social justice for families is a continuous endeavour that demands united efforts and steadfast dedication. The proposed Social Plan for the Families will focus on the following associated objectives with the aim of leading towards a more socially just and equitable society:

¹ Kerbo, H. R. (2003). Social stratification and inequality: Class conflict in historical and global perspective.

This proposed Social Plan for the Families will give particular importance to diverse family forms, life phases and challenging situations. Within this context, it is essential to consider the lessons learnt from the COVID 19 pandemic and strive to ensure that families have the necessary resources and resilience to face current and future shocks without weakening the social fabric, particularly the positive impact on society nurtured by families.

3.1 Assist the Most Disadvantaged Target Groups

One of the primary objectives of social justice is to combat poverty and social exclusion within society. This involves addressing the root causes of economic disparity and marginalisation. Through targeted policies, advocacy efforts, and community support, the fight against poverty and social exclusion remains a central pillar of the pursuit of social justice. Family poverty influences family functioning and stability, which can contribute to other factors such as well-being, poorer mental health, and violence. Investing in the social wellbeing of families is a precondition for social justice.

At national level, the social protection system provides a strong safety net to families. Nevertheless, changing social contexts have resulted in new challenges and realities for families. This necessitates consolidation of already existing measures and the further introduction of targeted measures to improve access to social benefits and family services, amongst others.

Addressing intergenerational poverty is also paramount for fostering a socially just society. Intergenerational poverty perpetuates cycles of disadvantage, limiting opportunities and hindering upward mobility for successive generations. Intergenerational poverty undermines the principles of social justice by entrenching disparities and perpetuating systemic inequalities. Therefore, by implementing targeted interventions and equitable policies aimed at addressing the root causes of intergenerational poverty, the aim is to create a more just and inclusive society where every individual has the chance to thrive regardless of their background or circumstances.

It is essential to acknowledge that beyond individuals facing the risk of poverty and social exclusion, there exist other disadvantaged groups who encounter significant challenges and different realities. From older persons coping with isolation and financial pressures to teen and single parents managing childcare alongside work on limited budgets, various circumstances contribute to heightened risks of harm, marginalisation, or disadvantage. Families contending with health issues, disabilities, or addiction, as well as immigrant families adapting to a new society, also confront unique challenges. These intersecting vulnerabilities underscore the importance of addressing the diverse needs of these groups in the pursuit of social justice, ensuring equitable opportunities and support for all.

To effectively assist target groups in the most disadvantaged situations, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. Targeted interventions designed to meet the unique needs of the main groups in the most difficult situations are pivotal. In particular, investment in mental health services and support networks is crucial for families grappling with issues such as poor mental health, disabilities, or addiction. By ensuring access to quality healthcare including mental health services, the proposed Social Plan for the Families promotes the well-being and stability of these families.

Improving access to quality education and skills training programmes (as further highlighted in the next chapters) is instrumental in empowering persons in the most difficult situations to enhance their socio-economic status, reduce their marginalisation and eventually break the cycle of disadvantage. Concurrently, bolstering the social protection system at the national level remains imperative to maintain a robust safety net for families confronting hardship, ensuring they receive essential support and resources needed for their well-being and stability.

In essence, addressing the diverse needs of disadvantaged groups within families requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach, combining targeted interventions, support services, and policy measures to ensure equitable opportunities and support for all. By prioritising the social well-being of families, this plan aims to advance the cause of social justice and create a more inclusive society.

3.2 Address challenges from an early stage by enhancing access to better services

Early intervention refers to the proactive and timely professional support provided to families who may be experiencing difficulties across various aspects of their lives. It entails identifying potential challenges or risks at an early stage and taking prompt action to address them. Early intervention is paramount for promoting positive development, well-being, and resilience among families.

Addressing challenges at their nascent stages, before they escalate into crises, and providing families with the requisite support to prevent or mitigate the long-term impact of these challenges—whether they pertain to education, behaviour, health, or social development—is imperative. Early intervention empowers families to remain resilient and lead fulfilling lives, while concurrently diminishing the likelihood of more severe difficulties emerging in the future. By embracing early intervention strategies, the plan aims to pave the way for stronger, more resilient families and communities.

Early intervention strategies within this context necessitate a comprehensive approach. They involve not only identifying and mitigating risks, but also bolstering the resilience of disadvantaged families. By adopting a proactive stance and investing in early intervention measures, the ultimate aim is to create a more equitable society where all families have the support they need to overcome adversity.

3.3 Enhancing Access to Better Services

Creating equitable systems where diverse families can access essential services is fundamental. However, access must not only be available, but also efficient, transparent, and responsive to the specific needs of each family.

Improved access to services positively impacts society. Community-based services are essential for supporting families by offering localised and accessible assistance tailored to their needs. Training programmes in community-based services are crucial for empowering community members to take charge of solutions that benefit diverse families. This sense of ownership fosters a stronger sense of belonging and well-being within the

community, encouraging greater citizen participation in initiatives that support families and promote overall community prosperity.

Outreach strategies play a pivotal role in enhancing and bridging access, encompassing public awareness campaigns, educational workshops, technological innovations, and multilingual services, ensuring that no family is left behind.

By championing enhanced access to essential services, the plan aims to pave the way for a society where every family can thrive. This Plan also advocates for future social services to be designed with the goal of empowering individuals, rather than fostering dependence that may exacerbate existing challenges. The aim is to create programmes that provide support, resources, and opportunities for personal growth and self-sufficiency. By focusing on empowerment, social services can help individuals to receive the necessary support to overcome obstacles, build resilience, and achieve long-term success, ultimately breaking cycles of dependency and contributing to overall community well-being.

3.4 Strengthening evidence-based policymaking

Evidence-based policymaking directly benefits families by ensuring that policies are designed to address their specific needs and challenges effectively. By relying on solid research and data analysis, policymakers can tailor interventions to improve outcomes in areas crucial to family well-being, such as healthcare, education, and social services. This approach leads to the development of targeted programmes that provide families with access to quality healthcare, affordable housing, and educational opportunities, enhancing their overall quality of life.

It is crucial to invest in evidence-based policymaking to promote transparency and accountability, ensuring that families can trust in the effectiveness and fairness of the policies that impact them.



PRIORITY TWO: HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

To nurture a positive family environment that helps individuals to better manage life stressors through constant comfort, guidance and strength.

Healthy family relationships improve and lead to wellbeing across the life course.

PRIORITY 2: HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Healthy family relationships are universally acknowledged to have deep and enduring effects on the well-being of individuals and society. Robust families are rooted in positive relationships, characterised by elements such as security, effective communication, strong connections, and the establishment of family rules. Positive family dynamics are built upon core values, dedicated quality time, collaborative teamwork, and mutual appreciation.

Failure to uphold healthy family relationships poses threats such as emotional strain, conflicts within relationships, and adverse effects on mental health. Conversely, maintaining these relationships not only benefits the immediate family and benefits the formation of its members, but also enhances the ability to form honest and meaningful connections outside the family environment, whether at work, school, or elsewhere.

Building healthy relationships can be challenging in today's fast-paced world, especially considering the challenges and expectations posed by the international dimension. Work demands, social commitments, and individual pursuits can leave minimal time and energy for nurturing family connections. Challenges like marital conflict including domestic violence, addictions, youth crime, disadvantaged children, and single parents are not solely the outcomes of dysfunctional families, but also stem from strain imposed by negative economic and social influences on specific family relations.

Policy Direction

To address these challenges, families require support structures, opportunities, and capacities with expert guidance to strengthen family connections and relationships. Government is dedicated to supporting healthy family relationships by reducing stressors and strengthening the resilience of Maltese society. Through adequate intervention this proposed Social Plan for the Families is expected to reinforce and sustain healthy family relationships, in particular to:

- Enhance children's well-being, fostering a sense of security and love, enabling them to navigate the world confidently, leading to a life free from addictions and negative attitudes.
- Empower families to solve problems, manage conflicts, and appreciate differences of opinion.
- Instill in children the values, experiences, and skills necessary for understanding and building healthy and robust present and future relationships.

While financial support and education play vital roles in maintaining healthy family relationships, they are not the sole determinants. Beyond financial stability and education, other factors equally contribute to the overall well-being of family dynamics. The following identified aims are designed to provide families with the essential support, time, and resources to nurture strong connections, promoting well-being within the family unit. By

prioritising these aims, families can establish a positive environment that fosters care, understanding, and growth.

This proposed Social Plan for the Families does not reinvent the wheel. Rather it flows from the **Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030** that identified 'Supporting Families with Children' as a National Priority with specific focus on 'Supporting a Positive Family Environment', 'Better Work-Life Balance for Parents' and a called for more 'Quality and Leisure Time'.

4.1 Balance between Work and Family Life for Parents

Achieving a balance between work and family life is fundamental for supporting healthy family relationships. This balance enables individuals to allocate dedicated family time, thus fostering communication and emotional connections while allowing individuals to be emotionally available and supportive within the family unit. Balancing work and family responsibilities promotes a fair distribution of tasks, reduces stress and adopts a sense of teamwork. Flexibility and adaptability in managing family commitments further strengthen family bonds. Prioritising well-being and self-care contributes to individuals' ability to engage in positive interactions and communicate effectively within the family. Moreover, achieving work-life balance serves as a positive role model for children and other family members, teaching them the importance of self-care, time management, and nurturing relationships. By recognising the importance of balancing work and family commitments, this proposed Social Plan for the Families aims to foster an environment where individuals can prioritise their families while effectively managing their other responsibilities.

While services that facilitate work-life balance, such as free childcare facilities, are undeniably important, it is equally crucial to recognise the critical role of early childhood experiences and the potential negative impact on children spending extensive hours away from parents or primary caregivers. Prolonged hours in childcare settings, especially during the formative years, can impact children's attachment to caregivers and may contribute to emotional and behavioural challenges later in life¹. By supporting policies that enable families to spend more quality time together, the aim is to mitigate the potential risks associated with extended childcare hours. This commitment not only fosters healthy child development but also strengthens the foundation for secure attachments and positive relationships throughout childhood and adolescence. Attachment allows children the 'secure base' necessary to explore, learn and relate, and the wellbeing, motivation, and opportunity to do so. It is important for safety, stress regulation, adaptability, and resilience.

4.2 Family assistance services

Family challenges are wide-ranging and often can be profound. It is fundamental that Government services² are aligned with the new and evolving range of family needs and forms in order to provide effective support. Across the board, the focus of Government services in relation to families should be on strengthening the family's capacity to provide a nurturing environment for all family members while also intervening to address problems which have developed and become manifest. How support is delivered and the quality of service matter and have direct impact on outcomes.

¹ Vandell, D. L., Belsky, J., Burchinal, M., Steinberg, L., Vandergrift, N., & NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. (2010). Do effects of early child care extend to age 15 years? Results from the NICHD study of early child care and youth development. *Child development*, 81(3), 737-756.

² In particular: social services, educational services, physical and mental health services, domestic violence services, drugs and addictions services.

Over the years a range of support services have been designed and are available to all families, especially those in the most vulnerable situations. However, it is acknowledged that more outreach and information is required (in particular of the Community Services and the Home-Based Therapeutic Services) to ensure that those most in need are aware of existing support.

A number of life challenges may be a 'one-off', but other difficulties may be of a more enduring nature and can challenge the coping skills of any family. By addressing existing gaps in family assistance services, this proposed Social Plan aims to promote measures and approaches to ensure that supportive services are as available and as effective as possible.

4.3 A focus on the Parent-Child Relationship

Different parenting styles influence children's social and emotional development, as well as their behaviour, education, mental and physical health. The parent-child relationship is as much as important for child development as the family income or structure. Scientific evidence established over many years suggests that the quality of interaction between a parent and a child is the best predictor of a child's normal healthy development¹. Any intervention to improve the wellbeing of the parents is also likely to improve the wellbeing of the child.

Within this context, this proposed Social Plan for the Families aims to support the factors impacting the parent-child relationship such as the parent's personality, mental health, values, social support as well as characteristics of the child themselves. This is expected to strengthen the capacity of families to nurture children and to function well for all members. The focus on effective prevention and early intervention is key.

4.3.1 Partner Relationships

Parents thrive when they have good quality relationships. A strong partner relationship has an impact on the adjustment of parents and can be a predictor of postnatal challenges. One's behaviour and that of the partner regarding how they nurtured their relationship during pregnancy predicted the decline or otherwise of their relationship². Those encountering mental health issues often report poor partner relationships.

Understanding the needs of parents from the start is important and it may differ according to different social contexts. This proposed Social Plan for the Families will aim to support parents from the early start at a pre-natal stage.

In cases of the parents that are no longer together, the notion of co-parenting³ needs to be further explained and given prominence. Co-parenting should be further encouraged in such cases with a view to ensuring as far as possible that children have the opportunity of developing close relationships with both parents, which is in the best interest of both children and their parents. However, it is also important to address the concerning issue of parental alienation. Efforts should be made to educate parents about the damaging effects of parental alienation on children's well-being and the parent-child relationship. Promoting

¹ Child Trends. "Parent-Child Relationship." Available at: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/the-parent-child-relationship-a-family-strength>. Accessed on 22/02/2024.

² Ter Kulle H, Finkenauer C, van der Lippe T, Kluwer ES. Changes in Relationship Commitment Across the Transition to Parenthood: Pre-pregnancy Happiness as a Protective Resource. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2021;12:132

³ Co-parenting is an arrangement where both parents work together and share the responsibilities of raising their child, or children, even though they are no longer married or in a romantic relationship.

awareness and understanding of parental alienation can help prevent its occurrence and safeguard the child-parent bonds. Therefore, within the plan of supporting families, initiatives to encourage healthy co-parenting practices while combatting parental alienation should be at the forefront, ensuring that children are nurtured in environments that prioritise their emotional and psychological needs above all.

4.4 Empowering through Values, Awareness and Understanding

The family serves as a catalyst for values by fostering an environment where virtues such as integrity, empathy, respect, and responsibility are not only taught but also lived. The interplay of familial relationships, traditions, and communication patterns creates a unique context for the cultivation and reinforcement of values that contribute to the overall character and well-being of its members.

The provision of education and information stands as a critical component in equipping individuals with the knowledge and tools essential for cultivating healthy family dynamics. Empowering individuals with moral values and informed decision-making skills enables them to adopt practices that contribute to positive family interactions and overall well-being.

In this endeavour, it is imperative to incorporate cultural sensitivity and inclusivity to address the diverse needs and experiences of families from different backgrounds. This proposed Social Plan for the Families acknowledges and respects various family structures, cultural practices, and individual needs and aims to foster an environment where all families feel valued. This approach ensures that educational and informational initiatives are not only relevant but also inclusive, reflecting the richness of diversity within the broader societal context.

4.5 Supporting Quality Time through a Dedicated Environment

Ensuring quality time within the family setting is paramount for fostering healthy relationships and overall well-being. In the limited spaces often found in a country like Malta, where spatial constraints may pose challenges, the creation of an adequate environment becomes even more crucial. Quality time is not merely about quantity but centres on the richness of the interactions and the positive atmosphere cultivated within the limited space available.

In such environments, optimising the living space takes on added significance. A well-crafted environment goes beyond physical arrangements; it involves designing spaces that not only accommodate the family's needs but also contribute to emotional enrichment and overall family harmony.

By intentionally dedicating time to shared activities, conversations, and experiences, families can amplify the positive effects of quality time within their optimised living space. This intentional approach extends beyond mere coexistence, transforming shared moments into opportunities for bonding and connection. The layout and design of the living space can support these endeavours, providing comfortable and inviting settings for family members to gather and engage in meaningful interactions.

Moreover, the impact of quality time on mental health in such confined living arrangements cannot be overstated. In the midst of busy schedules, the intentional creation of moments for genuine connection serves as a crucial reprieve from the stressors of daily life. A well-designed living environment can act as a sanctuary, offering family members a retreat where they can unwind, share their thoughts, and provide emotional support to one another.

Quality time, enriched by a conducive living environment, becomes a powerful tool for stress reduction. The cumulative effects of stress are alleviated as family members engage in meaningful conversations, fostering emotional understanding and unity.

Recognising the importance of these moments goes beyond considering them a luxury; it becomes a necessity for the overall well-being of the family unit. In places like Malta, where space is limited, the emphasis on optimising the available environment takes on heightened significance. A well-organised living space not only facilitates quality time, but also contributes to building resilience, promoting healthy lifestyle habits, and nurturing a stronger sense of belonging among family members.

4.5.1 Inclusive Activities

Facilitating inclusive activities or events holds significant social implications. By creating designated spaces within localities for communal gatherings, this proposed Social Plan for the Families aims to foster social cohesion and strengthen community bonds. Families engaging in shared activities contribute to a sense of belonging and connection among residents.

Overall, the social aspect of the inclusive activities extends beyond the immediate family unit, creating a vibrant and interconnected community that values shared experiences and mutual support.





PRIORITY THREE: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

To prioritise the development of fundamental abilities and to enable families to navigate challenges and seize opportunities.

Empowering families through essential basic skills, will lay the foundation for a transition towards a more advanced level of a knowledge-based society.

PRIORITY 3: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

The family unit serves as the main nurturing ground for learning, growth, and development. Prioritising essential basic skills holds paramount significance. Skills and knowledge lay the groundwork upon which families establish resilience, flexibility, and achievements in our contemporary society. Whether in managing daily household affairs or facing broader issues like technology use, various fundamental skills and capabilities are crucial for family well-being. Mastering these basics equips families to adeptly handle life's hurdles and capitalise on its opportunities.

Empowering families with essential basic skills also initiates a transformative ripple effect. Families who possess the necessary skills and knowledge are more capable at nurturing individuals who in turn also develop valuable skills, ultimately playing a crucial role in fostering economic advancement and social unity.

Policy Direction

In nurturing a culture of learning and skill enhancement within families, this proposed Social Plan endeavours to furnish the necessary support and resources. Its objective is to assist families in navigating the intricacies of contemporary life by offering avenues for individuals to acquire vital skills, thereby propelling them towards more advanced knowledge. This pivotal effort establishes the foundation upon which every family member can construct a lifelong journey of learning and personal development.

To cultivate a society abundant in knowledge and unleash its complete potential, the Government has an indispensable role as the primary facilitator. Building upon the acquisition of essential basic skills and knowledge, marks the initial crucial stride towards the progression of a knowledge-based society.

It is within this context that by providing resources, support, and opportunities this proposed Social Plan for the Families promotes, in particular, further parenting skills, life skills, digital literacy, and financial literacy. Through the identified strategic initiatives, Government aspires to create the foundations for a society where every family is not only equipped with the necessary skills but also actively engaged in the dynamic pursuit of knowledge and progress.

5.1 Nurturing Effective Parenting Skills

As already highlighted briefly in the previous chapters, parenting presents various challenges, especially during the transition to parenthood, which requires parents to maintain their mental well-being while adapting to new responsibilities. Therefore, establishing a solid foundation of adequate skills is a crucial step for parents to nurture children effectively.

Parenting encompasses a multitude of responsibilities, demanding that parents acquire knowledge spanning various domains such as;

- **Understanding developmental milestones;** understanding the stages of child development is essential for recognising and supporting children's growth. From infancy through adolescence, parents have to be supported to be aware of typical milestones in motor skills, language acquisition, social-emotional development, and cognitive abilities. Studies have indicated that when parents have higher knowledge of infant and child development, they show higher levels of parenting skills, their children have higher cognitive skills, and there are fewer child behaviour problems.¹
- **Safety;** creating a safe environment is paramount for children's well-being. Parents must be versed in childproofing techniques, safe practices for infants, home safety precautions, and recognising potential hazards². In particular it is also crucial for parents to be able to recognise and protect children against any forms of violence and abuse, ensuring a safe and nurturing environment for their well-being. Effective implementation of these skills can significantly reduce injury risks within the home environment³.
- **Health promotion;** promoting children's physical and mental health involves a range of practices, from nutritious feeding habits to recognise signs of mental health, manage common childhood ailments, and foster healthy habits for lifelong well-being. Parental recognition of early signs of mental health issues has been linked to improved outcomes in children's mental health interventions, emphasising the critical role parents play in early detection and intervention.⁴
- **Emotion regulation;** Helping children navigate their emotions is a crucial aspect of parenting. Parents should develop skills in recognising and validating children's feelings, teaching coping strategies, and modelling healthy emotional expression. Creating a safe and supportive environment, setting appropriate limits and boundaries, and seeking professional help if needed are ways parents can help their children develop emotional regulation skills⁵.
- **Effective communication with children;** Open and respectful communication lays the foundation for strong parent-child relationships. Parents should learn to listen actively, communicate expectations clearly, and engage in age-appropriate conversations with their children. Children who have open and effective communication with their parents are more likely to have higher self-esteem, better emotional regulation skills, and improved problem-solving abilities⁶.
- **Discipline techniques;** Discipline is not about punishment but about teaching and guiding children towards positive behaviour. Parents should understand positive discipline methods, setting boundaries, and using consequences that promote learning and growth. By implementing positive discipline strategies, parents can effectively teach and guide

¹ Matthew R Sanders, Alina Morawska (2014). Can Changing Parental Knowledge, Dysfunctional Expectations and Attributions, and Emotion Regulation Improve Outcomes for Children? Available at: <https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/parenting-skills/according-experts/can-changing-parental-knowledge-dysfunctional-expectations-and>

² Mark Pearson, Ruth Garside (2010). Preventing unintentional injuries to children in the home: a systematic review of the effectiveness of programmes supplying and/or installing home safety equipment. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49658345_Preventing_unintentional_injuries_to_children_in_the_home_A_systematic_review_of_the_effectiveness_of_programmes_supplying_and_or_installing_home_safety_equipment

³ Gielen AC, McDonald EM, Wilson ME, Serwint JR, Andrews JS, Hwang WT (2010). Preventing Unintentional Injuries in Children: A Review of the Literature. Health Promotion Practice.

⁴ Maria E. Pagano, Linden J. Cassidy, Michelle Little, J. Michael Murphy, Michael S. Jellinek. (2000). Identifying psychosocial dysfunction in school-age children: the pediatric symptom checklist as a self-report measure. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3274771/>

⁵ Simon and Schuster. Gottman, J. M., DeClaire, J (1998). Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting. Available at: https://books.google.com/books?id=ovawL4cGhJOC&pg=PAg&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=1#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁶ Seph Fontane Pennock (2023). Effective Communication with Children: Nurturing Strong Bonds and Understanding. Available at: <https://quenza.com/blog/knowledge-base/effective-communication-with-children/>

their children toward positive behaviour while maintaining a supportive and nurturing parent-child relationship¹.

- **Fostering resilience in children;** Building resilience helps children navigate challenges and setbacks. Parents can cultivate resilience by fostering problem-solving skills, encouraging a growth mindset, and providing a supportive environment where children can learn from failures. Various resilience processes and protective factors contribute to positive outcomes in children despite adversity, thus a critical aspect of healthy development².

This broad spectrum of knowledge enables parents to make informed decisions and provide optimal care for their children while fostering their overall development and well-being³.

A positive family environment plays a vital role in shaping children's development. Parental knowledge can have a significant impact on family dynamics, especially by promoting positive parenting practices. When parents have accurate information, they create a nurturing atmosphere that enhances their children's resilience and overall well-being⁴. This family setting acts as a powerful force in children's holistic growth, underscoring the profound influence of positive parenting methods on their long-term outcomes.

5.2 Life Skills

Life skills are the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life⁵. Life skills fundamentally contribute to the mental well-being and competence of individuals that are essential to enable families to successfully navigate through life and foster positive relationships. Parents, as primary caregivers, play a pivotal role in imparting life skills to their children, serving as role models and ensuring family resilience.

The cultivation of life skills within the family unit contributes to the overall cohesion and harmony of the family. Programmes designed to enhance life skills have resulted in reduced violent behaviour, improved social behaviour, better problem-solving abilities, and enhanced self-image and emotional adjustment among individuals⁶. When family members possess strong life skills, they are better equipped to handle stress, communicate effectively, and resolve conflicts constructively, thereby fostering a supportive and nurturing environment.

While there isn't a fixed or definitive list of life skills, as they can vary depending on context, culture, and individual needs, there are broad categories of life skills that are commonly recognised and considered essential for personal development and well-being. At the heart of family well-being lie three fundamental life skills: communication, problem-solving, and stress management. These essential abilities not only assist families in overcoming challenges but also create a positive and nurturing atmosphere where every member can flourish and develop together.

¹ Positive Discipline Strategies: Encouraging Good Behaviour in Children : DIYES International School. Affiliated to Cambridge – UK. Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/positive-discipline-strategies-encouraging-3eerc>

² Masten, A. S. (2001). Resilience processes in development. Available at: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2001-00465-004>

³ Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK402020/>

⁴ Can Changing Parental Knowledge, Dysfunctional Expectations and Attributions, and Emotion Regulation Improve Outcomes for Children? Available at: <https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/parenting-skills/according-experts/can-changing-parental-knowledge-dysfunctional-expectations-and>

⁵ World Health Organisation (WHO) Module 7 Life Skills. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/pdf/youthnet/action/message/escap_peers_07.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

Communication Skills: Effective communication lays the foundation for healthy relationships within families. Clear and open communication allows family members to express their thoughts, feelings, and concerns, fostering understanding and empathy. When conflicts arise, strong communication skills enable families to address issues constructively, find solutions collaboratively, and strengthen their bonds. Active listening, assertiveness, and the ability to express emotions in a respectful manner are key aspects of effective communication within families¹.

Problem-Solving Skills: Life is full of unexpected challenges, and developing problem-solving skills equips families with the ability to tackle difficulties methodically and creatively. Families that cultivate problem-solving abilities can approach challenges with a sense of resilience and adaptability. This skill involves identifying the root cause of a problem, brainstorming potential solutions, weighing the pros and cons, and implementing an action plan². Teaching children problem-solving skills from a young age empowers them to become confident, resourceful individuals who can navigate life's complexities³.

Stress Management and Resilience: In today's fast-paced world, managing stress is essential for overall well-being. Families that learn to cope with stress in healthy ways can maintain a harmonious environment even during challenging times. This includes techniques such as mindfulness, relaxation exercises, time management, and seeking support from one another. Building resilience as a family involves bouncing back from setbacks, learning from failures, and adapting to changes with a positive outlook. Resilient families are better equipped to weather life's storms and emerge stronger from adversity⁴.

Through the collective embrace of life skills, families strengthen their bonds and reinforce mutual trust and respect. This, in turn, enhances family dynamics and fosters a sense of belonging and security, laying the foundation for positive mental health and well-being for all members whilst empowering individuals to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives⁵.

5.3 Digital Literacy

The digital world has brought about significant transformation in family dynamics. The integration of social media into our everyday life has almost completely altered the ways in which our families communicate and interact with each other.

Amid the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, social media emerged as a valuable medium for family members to stay connected with their families, despite the physical distancing measures in place.

Conversely, while social media has been recognised for adding complexity to human social interactions and relationships⁶, it may actually hinder authentic family interactions. Social media may lead to adverse effects on family dynamics as family members often spend a significant amount of their leisure time engaging in online activities, instead of investing their time in quality family moments. The varying scientific findings on the positive

¹ William J. Pfeiffer (1998). Conditions that Hinder Effective Communication. Available at: <https://home.snu.edu/~jsmith/library/body/v06.pdf>

² Allison C. Paolini. Social Emotional Learning: Key to Career Readiness. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1249147.pdf>

³ William J. Pfeiffer (1998). Conditions that Hinder Effective Communication. Available at: <https://home.snu.edu/~jsmith/library/body/v06.pdf>

⁴ - The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Family Resilience and Traumatic Stress: A Guide for Mental Health Providers. Available at: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/family_resilience_and_traumatic_stress_providers.pdf

⁵ WHO. Skills-Based health Education Including life skills: An Important Component of a Child-Friendly/Health-Promoting School. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/42818/924159103X.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁶ Fortuna Procentese, Flora Gatti, Immacolata Di Napoli (2019). Families and Social Media Use: The Role of Parents' Perceptions about Social Media Impact on Family Systems in the Relationship between Family Collective Efficacy and Open Communication. Int J Environ Res Public Health.

or negative role of social media in family interactions further contribute to the nuanced understanding of its impact on family functioning¹.

Relatively children are constantly exposed to a vast array of content and potential online risks and immoderate gaming. The lack of media literacy education for both parents and children makes individuals vulnerable to unquestioningly accepting information and allowing their devices to wield disproportionate influence over their lives². Therefore, this type of exposure places pressure on parents to be effective digital parents, monitoring and controlling their children's social media presence. To alleviate this pressure and help parents create a safer online environment for their children, families should be provided with the necessary tools to develop their own and their children's digital skills. Parents need to teach children how to use technology responsibly, develop healthy digital habits, and promote positive online interactions.

5.4 Financial Management Skills

The financial management of a household can be a challenging task that demands careful planning and selflessness to ensure the well-being of all family members. Families with older members, individuals with specific needs, and large families face additional obstacles and financial strains.

Families have to be empowered to make prudent financial decisions when it comes to budgeting, savings, and investing. To achieve this, it is essential for individuals to possess financial literacy, defined as "the capability to apply knowledge and skills in effectively managing financial resources for lifelong financial well-being"^{3[1]}.

Financial management encompasses more than just handling daily expenses; it also involves creating long-term financial plans, such as pension planning, that require a comprehensive strategy and a forward-looking approach to managing finances. Prioritising and balancing needs over wants and accounting for unexpected expenses that may arise are vital components of effective budgeting.

Conveying financial knowledge to parents and their children at a young age, equips the whole family with vital skills for improved decision making^{4[2]}. Encouraging children's participation in financial discussions and decisions fosters healthy money management practices early on and enhances critical thinking skills.

¹ Fortuna Procentese, Flora Gatti, Immacolata Di Napoli (2019). Families and Social Media Use: The Role of Parents' Perceptions about Social Media Impact on Family Systems in the Relationship between Family Collective Efficacy and Open Communication. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*.

² Jessie Curell. Why Media Literacy is Important for Parents. Available at: <https://cefa.ca/parent-resource/becoming-a-media-literate-parent/>

³ [1] Stephen Molchan (2022). Importance of Developing Financially Literate Families and Communities: Opportunities for FCS Educators. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*.

⁴ [2] Financial Literacy Education and its Role in Promoting Family Economic Welfare. Ade Maharini Adiardani, *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, Vol. 13 (6) <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/8787248.pdf>

Action Through GEMMA

GEMMA is the financial capability dedicated section within the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights. GEMMA has laid down the foundations of financial literacy in Malta through the creation of its dedicated portal <https://gemma.gov.mt/>, social media pages, educational tools for people of different ages and needs, apps, publications aimed at children and adults, training, research and webinars.

Malta through GEMMA has participated for the second time in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/International Network for Financial Education (OECD/INFE) international survey on adult financial literacy¹. The study highlights:

- While 2 in 3 Maltese residents (67%) are able to afford a major expense, equivalent to their monthly income, 1 in 4 (25%) are not able to. Even higher scores were registered by the younger cohorts, aged 18-39 years, where an average 1 in 2 (53%) across these 3 age cohorts are not able to afford a major expense, equivalent to their monthly income.
- When it comes to setting and attaining financial goals, only 1 in 2 (54%) prepared a plan of action and a further 46% saved or invested money to meet their most important financial goal.
- Only 1 in 5 own a private pension plan.

The above research findings, confirm that Malta needs to increase its investment and efforts to continue to equip, educate and inform Maltese citizens in financial capability. Acquiring financial skills early in life yields significant long-term benefits. Financially literate individuals navigate life's financial challenges more effectively. Conversely, a lack of financial management skills can magnify even minor financial issues, leading to overwhelming stress. This stress often spills over into other areas of life, impacting personal relationships. Studies suggest that financial problems contribute to divorce in 90% of cases^{2[3]}.

¹ OECD. OECD/INFE 2023 International Survey of Adult Financial Literacy. OECD Business and Finance Policy Papers. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/publications/oecd-infe-2023-international-survey-of-adult-financial-literacy-56003a32-en.htm>

² [3] Maria Paula Calamato (2010). Learning Financial Literacy in the Family. Available at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4846&context=etd_theses



PRIORITY FOUR: ENHANCING MALTA'S FERTILITY RATE

To address various socio-economic factors
Influencing family planning.

PRIORITY 4: ENHANCING MALTA'S FERTILITY RATE

Malta faces a pressing demographic challenge characterised by persistently low fertility rates. This trend poses significant implications for the country's social fabric, economic sustainability, and long-term prosperity. The current state of lowest-low fertility in Malta has been years in the making, reflecting a gradual evolution of societal norms and individual behaviours (lifestyle decisions).

Malta has observed a shift in family dynamics over time, moving away from traditional structures to more diverse arrangements. Concurrently, societal perceptions of marriage and parenthood have evolved, with individuals increasingly prioritising personal and professional pursuits over starting a family. Economic factors, such as job instability (especially during periods of economic crisis such as the COVID pandemic) and housing affordability challenges, have further contributed to the delay in family formation and childbearing. The lack of time available for individuals pursuing their career, exacerbated by life stressors, has also played a significant role in this trend.

The impact of long educational courses on fertility cannot be understated, particularly for young girls who are dedicated to pursuing higher education. The prolonged duration of educational pathways often means that these individuals may delay entering into relationships with the intention of starting a family. This delay can have significant implications on family planning timelines, as the optimal windows for childbearing become narrower with age.

These multifaceted changes have collectively contributed to the gradual decline in fertility rates, underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of the underlying dynamics.

Policy Direction

The falling birth rates affect countries worldwide, not just Malta. However, simply dismissing it as 'inevitable' hampers the ability to find solutions. Despite being a small country, Malta possesses a unique and distinct identity. Government deems it crucial to take the necessary steps to safeguard our identity from any potential erosion.

To raise the fertility rate, a thorough analysis of the causes of low fertility was necessary. Within this context the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights has carried out an internal study to have further insights on Malta's Low Fertility, while also taking into consideration other available research¹ and main conclusions of local conferences².

Addressing the low fertility situation in Malta requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges the prolonged nature of these shifts. This proposed Social Plan aims to address the multifaceted drivers of low fertility while recognising the importance of

¹ "Perceptions and Attitudes of Women and Men in Malta towards work-life balance with a specific focus on family size" (March 2024) Authors: Prof. Anna Borg Dr Maja Miljanic Brinkworth, Prof. Liberato Camilleri

² In line with the main conclusions of the Conference organised by the Malta Employers Association entitled "Malta's Low Birth Rate: An Existential Challenge" <https://www.maltaemployers.com/wp-content/uploads/Low-birth-rate-Parliament-Conference-2023.pdf> The Parliament of Malta | 13 JULY 2023

supporting family formation and promoting a conducive environment for child-rearing. This requires coordinated efforts across various sectors of society.

By prioritising family-friendly workplace policies, ensuring housing affordability, implementing education / awareness programmes, and strengthening data collection capabilities, Malta can create an environment that supports family formation and parenthood. The ultimate aim is to create the necessary conditions to empower individuals and couples to make informed decisions about starting or expanding their families to secure a brighter future for generations to come.

The proposed Social Plan for the Families proposes the implementation of two distinct support packages aimed at encouraging family growth within the next decade. The first package will focus on providing comprehensive support for couples planning to have a third child within the next 10 years, offering a range of incentives and resources to facilitate their decision. Simultaneously, the second package will target support for couples intending to have a second child within the next 5 years, tailored to meet their specific needs and promote family expansion. Measures will be designed to create a supportive environment that recognises and values the importance of family, ensuring that couples feel empowered and equipped to make informed decisions about expanding their families.

Increasing Malta's fertility rate cannot be solely tackled by Government, employers, or civil society alone. Everyone has a role to play in addressing this challenge. Its complexity requires diverse holistic solutions. While no single measure can solve it, by adopting a holistic perspective and implementing targeted interventions, Malta can work towards fostering a sustainable population growth trajectory.

The policy measures and interventions that will be outlined are designed to tackle the multifaceted drivers of low fertility over a period of ten years. By implementing the targeted interventions aimed at supporting family formation and creating an environment conducive to child-rearing, Government anticipates observing initial impacts on the fertility rate within the first five years. As these measures gain traction and awareness grows, the aim is to see more substantial improvements in the fertility rate.

By 2030, thorough assessments will be conducted on the impact of the proposed measures through rigorous data collection and research. Based on the results, interventions and possible recalibration will be considered to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of the initiatives in achieving the desired outcomes by 2035.

Through this phased approach, Malta can work towards fostering a sustainable population growth trajectory and ensuring the well-being of future generations.

6.1 Family-Friendly Workplace Policies

In line with the previous chapter in relation to 'Family Relationships', one key area for intervention to promote increased fertility rates is the implementation of family-friendly workplace policies. The demands of balancing work responsibilities with family life can pose significant challenges for working parents, particularly for women who often bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities. Family-friendly workplace policies are fundamental to

alleviate these challenges by creating a supportive and flexible work environment that accommodates the needs of employees with caregiving responsibilities.

To fully realise the potential of family-friendly workplace policies, this proposed Social Plan recognises the need for a broader cultural shift. By creating an environment where individuals feel supported in their roles as both caregivers and professionals, family-friendly workplace policies encourage a shift in societal norms and attitudes towards family planning. The aim is to alleviate the fear of choosing between career advancement and starting a family, making it more feasible for individuals to pursue both without compromise. This cultural change is essential in fostering a society where the decision to have children is seen as compatible with career aspirations and where individuals are empowered to balance work and family life effectively. A cultural shift will create a more inclusive and supportive environment that not only benefits the well-being of families but also contributes to higher fertility rates and a sustainable future for our society.

Within this context this proposed Social Plan calls for further efforts to encourage employers¹ to offer benefits such as flexible work arrangements, part-time arrangements, incorporating a hybrid model of telecommuting and flexible work hours, and support for parental return-to-work transitions. Finding the right balance that supports these initiatives without compromising competitiveness is crucial. By creating a supportive work environment that accommodates the needs of working parents (or expecting parents), Malta can empower individuals to pursue both professional success and family fulfilment.

Ensuring equality between both parents in caring and family responsibilities is also crucial for fostering higher fertility rates within a society. This approach is essential in addressing stereotypes associated with caregiving responsibilities, particularly with regard to household tasks. When both partners share the responsibilities of childcare and household tasks equally, it not only promotes fairness but also creates a more conducive environment for family planning. This equality allows for greater flexibility in managing work and family life, reducing the burden of caregiving on any single individual.

6.2 Affordable Housing and Financial Stability

Another critical factor influencing fertility rates is housing affordability and financial stability. High housing costs and financial insecurity can deter young couples from starting or expanding their families. The strain of juggling housing costs with basic necessities and the fear of not being able to provide adequately for a child can lead to a delay in family planning or a decision to have fewer children than desired.

To address this challenge, policy interventions will focus on increasing access to affordable housing options through measures in particular through better targeted subsidised and tax incentives housing programmes for young couples and further support for first-time homebuyers. Additionally, efforts to further enhance financial stability, including job creation, better income, further investment in education and social welfare programmes, will continue to be prioritised by Government for alleviating financial pressures on households and fostering an environment conducive to family formation.

¹ In line with the main conclusions of the Conference organised by the Malta Employers Association entitled "Malta's Low Birth Rate: An Existential Challenge" <https://www.maltaemployers.com/wp-content/uploads/Low-birth-rate-Parliament-Conference-2023.pdf> The Parliament of Malta | 13 JULY 2023

6.3 Education and Awareness Programmes

Education and awareness programmes play a crucial role in empowering individuals to make informed choices regarding family planning and parenthood. This proposed Social Plan for the Families calls for more awareness and education to highlight the importance of family as a fulfilling life purpose, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of its significance.

It is fundamental to shed light on the values, virtues, joys and rewards of building strong family bonds, fostering love, support, and resilience within the family unit. Through raising awareness about the profound impact of family life, these initiatives will inspire individuals to view starting and nurturing a family as a deeply fulfilling and meaningful journey.

It is important to also highlight the challenges and responsibilities of parenthood, enabling individuals to grasp the profound impact of their decisions on their lives and potential children. The aim is to cultivate a supportive environment, instilling confidence in navigating the reproductive journey. This would also deepen comprehension of the social and economic factors influencing family planning, empowering individuals to make choices aligned with their values and future aspirations.

Comprehensive educational initiatives on should be introduced in schools, workplaces, and community settings.

6.4 Data Collection and Research

Although social success is frequently measured by economic parameters, which are undoubtedly vital, there is an increasing call to broaden the scope. It is crucial to consider additional dimensions of our lives that significantly influence the flourishing and sustainability of society.

Data and research are crucial elements in understanding and addressing fertility trends. Through comprehensive data collection and analysis, policymakers can gain valuable insights into factors influencing fertility rates, such as age at first childbirth, access to reproductive healthcare, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural norms. This information serves as a foundation for designing effective interventions and policies aimed at promoting fertility and supporting family formation. Updated data is also fundamental for the evaluation of the impact of existing programmes and the identification of emerging trends, ensuring that strategies remain relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the population.

Within this context, Government aims to establish population register to track changes in population size and structure, enabling monitoring of fertility patterns and determinants. Efforts will also be made to close data gaps in national databases, by ensuring comprehensive reporting of demographic indicators such as marriage rates, fertility rates, and labour force participation rates. By strengthening data collection and research capabilities, Malta can enhance its understanding of fertility trends and tailor policy interventions to effectively address the underlying drivers of low fertility.

MONITORING & EVALUATION

In order to ensure the effective implementation and continuous monitoring of the expected outcomes of the proposed Social Plan for the Families, a robust system of monitoring and evaluation will be established.

A **High-Level Group on Implementation and Monitoring** will be set up and tasked with overseeing the implementation progress and assessing the impact of the initiatives outlined in the plan. This group will comprise representatives from key government ministries¹, relevant stakeholders from civil society, and experts in family welfare. Their collective expertise and diverse perspectives will provide valuable insights into the plan's implementation on the ground.

The High-Level Group on Implementation and Monitoring will be responsible for developing a comprehensive monitoring framework with clear quantitative indicators (based on the proposed measures of this plan) and timelines for each initiative within the Social Plan. The monitoring framework will ensure that progress can be measured effectively and outcomes assessed. Regular meetings and reporting mechanisms will be established to track the progress of initiatives, identify challenges, and propose adjustments as needed.

In addition to quantitative indicators, the high-level Group on Implementation and Monitoring will also emphasise the importance of qualitative assessments. This will involve conducting surveys, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with families, service providers, and other stakeholders to gather feedback on the impact of the plan's interventions. These qualitative insights will provide a deeper understanding of how families are experiencing the initiatives, allowing for adjustments to be made based on real-life experiences and needs.

Transparency and accountability will be key principles guiding the monitoring and evaluation process. Reports on the progress of the proposed Social Plan will be made available to the public every 2 years, ensuring transparency in the implementation process.

Feedback mechanisms will also be established to allow families and communities to provide input, share their experiences, and raise any concerns they may have. This participatory approach will enable continuous learning, refinement of strategies, and responsiveness to the evolving needs of families.

Ultimately, the establishment of a high-level Group on Implementation and Monitoring reflects Government's commitment to ensuring that the proposed Social Plan for the Families achieves its intended goals and makes a tangible difference in the lives of families in Malta. By systematically tracking progress, assessing impact, and engaging with stakeholders, we will create a dynamic and adaptive framework that continuously evolves to meet the evolving needs of families and communities.

¹ This group will consist of representatives at the Senior Manager level or above

MONITORING & EVALUATION

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The proposed Social Plan for the Families highlights the crucial roles of both Government and civil society in sculpting a society where every family can flourish. This comprehensive framework, focusing on the themes of social justice, nurturing relationships, skills empowerment, and enhancing Malta's fertility rate, charts a path towards a resilient and prosperous future for all families.

Achieving success hinges on the joint responsibility we all bear in this mission. Government initiatives must be bolstered by the active involvement and backing of every Ministry and respective departments and entities, civil society organisations, community, and ultimately families and individuals.

The economy exists to serve the people, not vice versa. While acknowledging the changing world around us, we take pride in our distinctive approach. It is imperative to prioritise the wellbeing of our people, recognising it as a paramount concern, often surpassing the importance of the economy itself. The proposed Social Plan for the Families represents more than just a collection of policies; it will serve as a roadmap towards a shared vision of enduring positive change, safeguarding that no family is left behind. The ultimate aim is to cultivate an environment where families are empowered to thrive.

CONCLUDING REMARKS