



European Construction Sector Observatory

Policy fact sheet

Malta

Restore Your Home

Thematic objective 1

December 2019



In a nutshell

Implementing body	Ministry for Transport, Infrastructure and Capital Projects (MTIP) and the Planning Authority (PA).
Key features & objectives	Grant scheme supporting the regeneration of Malta's Urban Conservation Areas (UCAs), or village core areas, and promoting investment in the restoration, conservation and maintenance of Malta's built heritage.
Implementation date	2017 - 2019 (annual funding scheme that may be extended beyond 2019)
Targeted beneficiaries	General public
Targeted sub-sectors	Residential and commercial
Budget (EUR)	8 million (2017) 10 million (2018) 5 Million (2019)
Good practice	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Transferability	★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

Malta is currently experiencing a period of considerable growth and the construction sector is no exception. In 2018, the Maltese construction sector grew by 10.3% and it is now a EUR 400 million industry (compared to EUR 300 million in 2011)¹.

The construction sector in Malta has been reinventing itself over recent years. The high

quantity of historical areas and buildings has resulted in a strong focus on heritage-led regeneration and renewal. Ageing buildings and urban decay are an important issue on the island; a challenge that government programmes are seeking to address².

The renovation of old Maltese buildings and the regeneration of urban areas are now being seen as opportunities upon which to base the future growth of the construction sector, and through which to deliver important benefits to society. With the aim of regenerating Urban Conservation Areas and to preserve the island's cultural, historical, archaeological and artistic heritage, the Maltese government launched the Restore Your Home (Irrestawra Darek) grant scheme in January 2017^{3,4}.

Restore Your Home (RYH) is an annual scheme that provides grant funding to support restoration and maintenance work on privately owned residential properties within UCAs and on Grade 1 and Grade 2 listed residential buildings.

In the three years that the scheme has been running, the number of applications received from citizens has been overwhelming for the Authorities. Due to the high level of demand, the authorities intend to launch a new edition of the scheme in 2020 and in subsequent years⁵.

However, the grant scheme does not define the colour, materials, etc. to be used in the restoration of the properties and leaves total freedom to the residents. This has resulted in practices among citizens that reduce the authenticity and heritage value of the island, such as use of tiles, bright colours, outdoor A/C units, etc⁶. In other words, some citizens are leaving aside the objective of the scheme of conserving cultural and historical heritage and restoring following their own criteria.

1.

General description

The **Restore Your Home (Irrestawra Darek)** grant scheme is focused on the promotion of sustainable regeneration of the Urban Conservation Areas of Malta. The scheme has run for three consecutive years (2017, 2018, 2019) thus far.

The amount of funding available on an annual basis has varied from year to year, ranging from EUR 5 to 10 million, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Amount of funds available for the years 2017, 2018 and 2019

Year	Funds
2017	EUR 8 million
2018	EUR 10 million
2019	EUR 5 million

Source: Times of Malta and Government of Malta^{7 8 9}

The funds available for the RYH grant scheme of each year come from the fees the Authority generates from the **Planning Regularisation Scheme**. This scheme allows non regularised buildings (or building parts) to be regularised (through a regularisation process)¹⁰. Fees accompanying such applications generate millions of euros and the Planning Authority re-utilises 70% of that money on other projects, such as the RYH grant scheme.

The scheme is administered and monitored by the Planning Authority, which is responsible for assessing and awarding RYH grants. Grant funding applications can be submitted online and they are awarded on a 'first come, first served' basis. To be awarded a grant, a project needs to meet the scheme's eligibility criteria and must conform with planning legislation, building permit conditions and professional standards. The Planning Authority also reserves the right to close the scheme before the deadline, if the available funds are granted.

The scheme is open to private owners of:

- Buildings within the Urban Conservation Area, which is a legally designated an area of buildings having collective heritage value according to Article 57 of the Development Planning Act of 2016;
- Grade 1 and Grade 2 listed buildings, which are legally protected heritage properties in accordance with Article 57 of the Development Planning Act of 2016.

The RYH scheme introduced a new category in 2019 – Streetscapes in Urban Conservation Areas. Streetscapes refer to a group of residences, which can include a commercial component, and which together take up 50 metres or more in length. This group can submit a joint application, with the agreement of all owners and residents, for a grant to restore the façade.

Out of the EUR 5 million budget for 2019, EUR 4 million is destined for private building owners and EUR 1 million for streetscapes. The allocation of funding per applicant depends on the property type:

- Private owners of residences located within UCAs may apply for a grant of 70% of the works, up to EUR 10,000;
- Private owners of Grade 1 may apply for a grant of 70%, up to EUR 100,000;
- Private owners of Grade 2 may apply for a grant of 70%, up to EUR 50,000¹¹.

The grant scheme covers three types of renovations, depending on the building type: façade, interior and garden architecture. Table 2 provides a summary of the grants, where the two beneficiary types are considered (general public and streetscapes) and the different characteristics for the restoration of buildings are defined for each of the cases.

Table 2: Summary of the grant scheme

Beneficiary	Type	Use of property	Façade	Interior	Garden Architecture
General public	UCA	Res	Yes	No	No
	Grade 2	Res	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Grade 1	Res	Yes	Yes	Yes
Street-scape	UCA	Res / Com	Yes	No	No
	Grade 2	Res	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Com	Yes	No	No
	Grade 1	Res	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Com	Yes	No	No

Res = Residential / Com = Commercial

Source: Planning Authority¹²

The RYH grant scheme is mainly focused on the regeneration of Malta's Urban Conservation Areas, also known as village cores. For this, the main objective is to promote investment in the restoration, conservation and maintenance of Maltese built heritage among the citizens. The PA and the Ministry for Transport, Infrastructure and Capital Projects are able to address different aspects, such as the success of the programme, the interest of citizens on it, etc. by monitoring the number of submissions received for the grant scheme.

2.

Achieved or expected results

The Government and the Planning Authority (PA) are responsible for processing the requests received. During the first two years of the grant scheme, over 1,700 applicants have benefited from the EUR 18 million available. In the third edition, the available budget of EUR 5 million was fully allocated to applicants. Due to these satisfactory results, and according to the Government budget for 2020, the Restore Your Home Scheme will be reopened for another year¹³.

To encourage citizens to participate in the grant scheme, the requests can be made through the Authority's online e-application system by Periti, which eases the submission process¹⁴. This facility for residents has influenced the submission quantity and the PA is overwhelmed with the results of the three years. Table 3 shows the amount of applications received each year and the time it took to close off the receipt of submissions. The figures indicate good public awareness of the scheme and strong interest in it, evidenced by the increasing speed in which the funds are exhausted.

Table 3: Number of requests and time to close off the reception during the three editions

Year	N° of requests	Time to close off
2017	883	10 weeks
2018	1,100	2 weeks
2019	>750	1 hour

Source: Planning Authority and Newsbook^{15, 16, 17, 18}

Besides the opportunity of applying online, the PA and the Local Councils Association reached an agreement from the first edition. Through this agreement, each Council provides the professional services of an architect specialised in conservation. This assistance is available to all residents, but is especially designed to help the elderly and those

with special needs¹⁹. This professional help was responsible for the receipt of more than 50 submissions from senior citizens and 5 submissions from persons with special needs in 2018²⁰.

To assure successful results for the coming editions of the RYH scheme, it is necessary to achieve even wider public awareness. Different actions, such as e-applications and technical assistance for restoration, may be just the starting point.

As the objective is to maintain the cultural heritage of the entire island through the awareness of citizens, it is important to analyse the distribution of the grants awarded. Table 4 shows the towns with more grants for residences in the first and second years of the RYH grant scheme.

Table 3: Most awarded towns by the RYH (Irrestawra Darek) grant scheme in 2017 and 2018

Year	Town/city	N° of requests
2017	Sliema	64
	Zebbug	48
	Valetta	46
2018	Sliema	54
	Zebbug	50
	Valetta	44

Source: Planning Authority and Independent^{21, 22}

The RYH grant scheme provides financial aid to carry out the project, but it does not define the materials, techniques or colours that should be used for façades, interiors or gardens. This has led to a number of practices that reduce the cultural heritage of the island. To overcome this situation, the Planning Authority launched a campaign in which posters were shared online, with different messages urging home owners to avoid vibrant colours, tiles, and outdoor A/C systems on their façades.

3.

Perspectives and lessons learned

The Restore Your Home (RYH) grant scheme has been successful for three consecutive years, in which all the funds destined to restoration and conservation of façades have been awarded. Moreover, the programme has been forced to close off the reception of submissions for all the editions, which shows a positive answer from citizens.

The Executive Chairman of the Planning Authority says that they have never received so many online submissions for this type of scheme. He contends that the Restore Your Home grant scheme has been a success story and that the huge demand shows that residents living in urban conservation areas and historical properties wish to ensure that their property is well maintained and conserved²³.

According to the Parliamentary Secretary for Planning and Simplification of Administrative Process, when a scheme closes early, it shows that there is a thirst for that scheme²⁴.

With the aim of reaching all groups of citizens, the scheme was adapted in 2018 in order to help a larger number of groups from society. As a result, the budget was increased from EUR 8 million to EUR 10 million. The Chairman of the Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee supported the reservation and allocation of part of the funds for persons with disabilities (EUR 1 million), the elderly (EUR 1 million) and voluntary organisations (EUR 500.000)²⁵.

Due to the positive results of the RYH grant scheme, the Chairperson of the Planning Authority's Executive Council states that "For the 3rd year in a row, the RYH scheme has been a success story. This is a tangible initiative and an example of how we are promoting the safeguarding of our village cores and scheduled properties. In total, over the past three years, we have committed EUR 23 million to this scheme. The overwhelming demand shows that there is a thirst by residents living within urban conservation areas and in historical properties to

ensure that their property is well maintained and conserved".

Despite the success of the scheme, some issues have also been detected. Although the scheme enables citizens to carry out restoration and conservation works, it is intended to support the conservation of Malta's heritage. However, a number of practices found in recent years reduce the authenticity and heritage value of these places: bright colours on the façade, placing an outdoor A/C unit, tiles on the façade, makeshift canopies, cleaning the façade of the property and placing PV panels. This campaign has created two sides; those supporting the campaign for street-scape coherence and those criticizing the PA action.

According to the non-supportive group of citizens, the Planning Authorities may get their priorities right. Citizens are critical of the fact that they have to keep in line with the surroundings, whereas those constructing concrete towers near the UCAs do not have any restrictions. Nonetheless, there are members of the public that are asking the PA to act on brightly painted façades²⁶. Despite this controversy, the view from one architect is that "the authority was right in pushing for street-scape coherence". However, he suggests that planners should place greater emphasis, and adopt a stronger stance, on the general form, style and proportion of new buildings that are built next to older ones²⁷.

Furthermore, the conservation of cultural and historic heritage may not only be focused on the buildings within UCAs. As an example, Villa Barbaro in Tarxien is one of the oldest buildings in the island, but is located in a street bordering the urban conservation area and faces simple two-storey buildings whose owners wish to demolish their homes and build four storey buildings and penthouses. The director of an architecture and design company says that there is a need to protect Malta's heritage from destruction. In addition,

according to the members of the Din I-Art Helwa organisation, concentric buffer zones should be introduced around historic buildings, gardens and UCAs. This would help their conservation, not only of the buildings themselves, but of their context²⁸.

From a financial point of view, the Coordinator of the Flimkien Ghal Ambjent Ahjar contends that a more direct form of financial aid would help the owners of properties to preserve them. Potentially, such a measure could ward off lawsuits for compensation from owners²⁹.

In the first three editions, refunds had to be claimed after the works had been completed and the property had been inspected, considering that any failure can entail the loss of the entire grant. Once

this inspection is done with positive results, an appointment needs to be scheduled among the RYH officers and the beneficiary to provide all of the relevant fiscal receipts. After this submission of the eligible original fiscal receipts, the recommendation for refund is processed and presented to the Development Planning Fund Committee for a decision.

Residents carrying out the works have to go through a lot of bureaucracy in order to receive the financial aid, which in some cases results in missing or wrong documents, long waiting times, submissions not done in time, etc. Therefore, controversy among the applicants and the Planning Authority can be generated when claiming the payment.

4.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Restore Your Home grant scheme is a crucial programme for the conservation of cultural and historic heritage of Malta. It has been positively welcomed by the public during the three editions and a new edition is programmed for 2020. The Planning Authority has allocated EUR 23 million to regenerate the UCAs over the next three years³⁰.

The RYH scheme has generated high demand. As well as providing financial assistance to encourage owners to restore façades, interiors and garden architecture, the RYH also provides other valuable assistance. It helps owners through the e-application process and also provides them with the assistance of an architect.

However, the freedom that the grant scheme offers to owners has also led to a misunderstanding of the scheme's objective. Different practices, such as using bright colours or tiles, are reducing the authenticity of the island. The Planning Authority therefore created a campaign to overcome this situation.

Awareness of the surroundings of Urban Conservation Areas (UCAs) is increasing; however, more concrete buildings are being built around UCAs, which are affecting those areas. Conservation is not only important for buildings, but also for their surroundings, in order to maintain the cultural and historical heritage of Malta.

In financial terms, the RYH grant scheme has run out of funds in each of its three years of operation. In the second edition, requests amounted to over EUR 12.8 million³¹ (EUR 10 million budget), and in the third year, requests amounted to more than EUR 8 million³² (EUR 5 million budget). This means that the funds available for the grant scheme are not sufficient to meet demand. An increase in the scheme's budget should be considered to equate supply with demand.

Looking forward, some recommendations are suggested:

- Define the restoration and conservation materials, techniques, etc. standards for the RYH grant scheme to avoid practices that do not respect the cultural heritage of the island;
- Control the destruction of typical buildings and the construction of concrete buildings around UCAs and historic buildings. This will maintain the context of the historical and cultural areas within the island;
- Re-consider the way in which the funds are awarded. A more direct form of financial aid would ease the private investments of the owners. For instance, the submission of eligible financial receipts could be sent by post or in a digital format through a platform, instead of through an appointment with RYH officers.

Overall, the RYH grant scheme is rated as '4-star good practice', on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

This is based on the high level of demand for the scheme, and therefore, the assurance of the restoration and conservation of around 800 buildings of cultural heritage each year. To achieve a fifth star, the grant scheme should standardise the restoration techniques, tools, materials, etc. to completely assure the conservation of the heritage. Furthermore, it may be interesting to create a more direct way of financial aid, which will incentivize more citizens to participate in the RYH grant scheme.

The RYH is rated as a '3-star transferable measure', on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high).

The principles of this grant scheme could be applied in any country that needs to conserve their cultural and historical heritage. However, any such scheme would need to be fully tailored to a country's specific identity and requirements.

Endnotes

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