

Selection of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) 2030 in Malta

September 2026

The Expert Panel's report

Selection stage

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Contents

Introduction 4
Bidding phases 4
Selection hearing 5
National context 5
Assessments of the candidates 5
Victoria 6
Introduction 6
Contribution to the long-term strategy 7
Cultural and Artistic Programme 8
European dimension 8
Outreach 9
Management 10
Capacity to Deliver 11
Conclusion 11
The panel's decision 12
Designation 13
Melina Mercouri Prize 13
Reputation of an ECoC 13
The monitoring phase 14
The panel's recommendations 14
Recommendations for Victoria 14
Thanks 16
Signed 16

Introduction

This report presents the findings of the Expert Panel (the "panel") for the selection phase of the competition for the European Capital of Culture ("ECoC") 2031 in Malta. The competition is a European Union initiative created in 1985. The title has previously been awarded to one city in Malta, namely Valletta in 2018.

The Valletta Cultural Agency (the "Agency") acts as the managing authority of the competition, which is governed by Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 April 2014, as amended by Decision (EU) 2017/1545, and by the Call for Submission of Applications for the Union Action "European Capital of Culture" for the Year 2031 in Malta.
In accordance with the applicable rules, an independent expert panel was established to support the selection process.

During the pre-selection phase, the panel comprised eight members, of whom six were appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies and two by the Ministry responsible for Culture. For the selection phase, the panel was expanded to nine independent experts, with seven members appointed by the European Union institutions and bodies and two by the Ministry responsible for Culture. This composition was intended to ensure an appropriate balance of expertise and institutional representation throughout the different stages of the selection process.
The competition took place in two phases: pre-selection and final selection.

Bidding phases

The Agency issued a call for applications on 7 October 2024. Two applications were submitted by the closing date of 26 September 2025: Birgu and Victoria. Following the pre-selection meeting in November 2025, the panel recommended that Victoria be shortlisted for the final selection. The pre-selection report identified strengths in the candidate's "Island of Islands" concept, community engagement, artistic ambition, international partnerships and the early establishment of the Victoria2031 Foundation, while also identifying areas requiring further development in long-term strategy, financing, participation, the European dimension, governance and delivery capacity.

The managing authority accepted the panel's recommendation and invited the shortlisted city to submit its final application ("bid-book") by 31 August 2026. Victoria subsequently submitted its final bid-book within the given timeframe.
A delegation of four panel members undertook the city visit on 22 September 2026, accompanied by observers from the managing authority and the European Commission. The delegation reported its findings to the full panel at the selection meeting.

Selection hearing

The panel met in person on 23 September 2026 in Valletta. Representatives of the managing authority and of the European Commission attended the meeting as observers. The observers did not take part in the panel's deliberations or decision-making.
All panel members signed declarations of no conflict of interest and confidentiality. The panel confirmed Suvi Innilä served as Chair and Georgina Portelli as Vice Chair. Roberta Ferrarini was elected as rapporteur.
At the selection hearings on 23 September, the candidate city presented its case (45 minutes) and answered questions from the panel (90 minutes).
The Chair of the panel announced the panel's recommendation at a press conference on 23 September 2026, in the presence of the Ministry of Culture as well as representatives of the European Commission Representation in Malta.

National context

The year 2031 will mark the second time Malta has hosted a European Capital of Culture, following Valletta in 2018.
The panel noted that the experience of the first Maltese title provides a relevant context for a second ECoC in the country. The panel also recognised that the current ECoC framework places particular emphasis on contribution to the long-term strategy, cultural and artistic content, European dimension, outreach, management, and capacity to deliver.
The panel welcomed the progress made by the pre-selected city between the pre-selection and selection stages and considered that the bidding process itself had already contributed to the development of cultural policy, partnerships and capacity in Victoria and Gozo.
The panel encourages the candidate city to continue developing and implementing its cultural strategies in the spirit of the European Capital of Culture initiative.

Assessments of the candidates

In its assessment of the candidate, the panel took into account the general and specific objectives set out in Article 2 of Decision No 445/2014/EU, as well as the requirement that the application be based on a cultural programme with a strong European dimension created specifically for the title year.
The panel evaluated the bid against the six criteria defined in Article 5 of the Decision:

- Contribution to the long-term strategy;
- Cultural and artistic content;
- European dimension;
- Outreach;
- Management;
- Capacity to deliver.

The panel's assessment was based on the overall content of the final bidbook, the presentation, and the questions and answers during the selection meeting. The comments that follow summarise the main points of the panel's discussions. For the selected city, the panel

provides recommendations intended to support the successful implementation of the European Capital of Culture year.

Victoria

Introduction

Victoria's bid, ECoC V31Għ – An Island of Islands, builds on the artistic vision presented at the pre-selection stage while developing it further into a more articulated framework for cultural, social and European action. At the centre of the proposal is the understanding of Victoria and Gozo as part of an archipelago shaped by relationships: between people and places, between human and more-than-human life, and between islands, communities and European territories. The sea is presented not as a boundary but as a connective space through which stories, knowledge, practices and experiences circulate. In this sense, the concept of the archipelago provides both an artistic language and a way of considering Victoria's position within Europe.

The bid-book places particular emphasis on the conditions of island life. Gozo is described as a place experiencing pressures associated with limited resources, infrastructural constraints, demographic change, development and overtourism, while also sharing many of these challenges with other European islands. The bid-book seeks to use culture not simply to represent these realities but to create opportunities to explore alternative ways of living together and of responding to them. The notion of Victoria as an Islands Laboratory for Relational Practices is therefore central to the proposal: a place where questions of coexistence, participation, cultural policy and public life can be explored through artistic practice, exchange and experimentation, with knowledge moving between Victoria, other islands and the wider European context.

The panel noted the importance given in the presentation to three guiding values - slowness, care and courage. Slowness is understood as creating the time and conditions for attentiveness, encounter and sustained collaboration; care as a responsibility towards relationships between people, communities, institutions and places; and courage as an openness to difference, experimentation and uncertainty. These principles are intended to inform not only the artistic programme but also the way in which it is developed and delivered. The proposal consequently places considerable emphasis on participation, capacity-building and the creation of relationships that can continue beyond the title year.

The cultural programme is conceived as a multi-year process running from 2027 to 2032, rather than as a concentration of activities in 2031. The panel heard how projects are intended to develop through research and partnership-building, artistic experimentation and participation, production and presentation, followed by evaluation, continuation and transfer. Around 75% of the programme is already defined, while approximately 25% is intentionally left open to allow for new ideas, artists, partnerships and opportunities to emerge during the process. This approach is supported by a combination of commissions, co-productions, residencies, open calls and partnerships, with research, mentoring, technical support and critical reflection intended to strengthen the quality and sustainability of the work.

Two transversal elements give particular shape to the proposed legacy. Arkivju Ħaj | A Living Archive is conceived as a living body of knowledge, gathering and activating memories, stories,

practices and materials connected with Gozo, while Ħjut Ħajjin | Living Threads is presented as the method through which skills, relationships, confidence and cultural capacity can be developed. The panel noted that this approach seeks to move beyond the delivery of individual projects towards a longer-term process of strengthening the cultural ecosystem. A pilot of Living Threads had already begun in 2026, including work on audience development, internal workshops and stakeholder conversations, indicating an intention to use the candidacy period itself for testing, learning and adjustment.

The European dimension is similarly embedded in the overall concept. The proposal connects Victoria with other European islands, cities and cultural organisations around shared questions, including ecological change, migration, cultural resilience, minority and regional languages, care, public space and the particular conditions of peripheral territories. Cooperation with current and future European Capitals of Culture, former candidate cities and island networks is intended to create reciprocal exchanges rather than simply to present European work in Victoria. The panel also noted the proposal's ambition to use Victoria as a place from which island perspectives can contribute to wider European discussions.
Overall, the proposal seeks to connect artistic development, participation, European cooperation and cultural capacity-building through a common understanding of Victoria as part of an interconnected island within a wider European archipelago.

Contribution to the long-term strategy

The Rabat, Città Victoria Cultural Strategy 2026–2035 provides the principal long-term policy framework for the candidacy. The final bid establishes a clear relationship between the Strategy and the ECoC, particularly in relation to participation, cultural development, sector capacity, infrastructure, heritage and connectivity. The panel noted that the Strategy had been approved by the Victoria Local Council and that the ECoC is presented as part of a wider cultural development process rather than as an isolated event in 2031. The candidacy has also used the preparation period to develop Ħjut Ħajjin | Living Threads, with a first pilot in 2026 and activities relating to audience development, internal workshops, mapping, mobility and professional development. The panel noted that this cultural strategy is solid and structured, and aligned with the 2031 ECoC programme.

The hearing provided further clarification on the intended long-term approach. In response to questions about the relatively limited allocation identified for the legacy period and the monitoring period after 2031, the candidate explained that legacy is intended to be shared beyond the Foundation and to involve other localities and the wider community. The Islands Laboratory for Relational Practices was described as a capacity-building and mobility framework, beginning with mapping and extending to cultural mobility, exchange and seed funding. The candidate also explained that the approach to monitoring would combine direct indicators with an adjustable evaluation process, allowing findings to inform implementation. The panel noted that the bid therefore links strategy, capacity-building, mobility and legacy, while the precise long-term responsibilities and financial architecture remain presented across several components rather than within one consolidated legacy framework.

The panel also examined the relationship between the ECoC and longer-term changes affecting Victoria and Gozo. Development pressures, including gentrification and overtourism, were raised in the presentation and discussion as risks that may interact with cultural development, public space and local community life. The proposed monitoring framework

includes cultural, community, economic and spatial indicators and a longitudinal approach. The panel noted the breadth of the proposed measurement system and the candidate's intention to use evaluation as a learning process, while note that the current framework needs further development and tailoring for the ECoC 2031 programme and scope.

Cultural and Artistic Programme

The final bid develops An Island of Islands as the central artistic concept and connects it to relationships between people, communities, places, islands and more-than-human life. The sea is used as a connecting element, while slowness, care and courage are presented as guiding values. Arkivju Ħaj | A Living Archive and Ħjut Ħajjin | Living Threads provide transversal structures, while six programme entities contain 31 projects, alongside transversal tools and methods and preliminary concepts for the opening and closing. The panel noted the development of the programme since pre-selection, including greater detail on partners, timelines, project development processes and the combination of heritage, contemporary practice, participation, education, ecology and digital approaches.

The hearing added detail on the balance between an established programme and further development. Approximately 25% of the programme remains open, while projects are developed through expressions of interest, open calls, curated commissions, co-productions and residencies. The candidate described quality over quantity as an operating principle and explained that projects move through discussion with partners, artistic development, approval and production.

The panel's assessment also took account of the programme's conceptual density. In addition to An Island of Islands, the bid uses the notions of the archipelago, the holobiont, the three guiding values and the Islands Laboratory, while the programme itself contains numerous thematic and project lines. The panel noted that these elements provide several layers of meaning but that their respective functions within curatorial decision-making are not always immediately apparent. The hearing also addressed the distribution of responsibility between artistic leadership and curatorial roles, and how artistic quality would be maintained while leaving part of the programme open. The panel noted that the final proposal has developed a structured artistic framework, while the scale and plurality of its components make the relationship between concept, curatorial responsibility and execution an important part of the overall assessment.

European dimension

The European dimension is embedded in the artistic concept and in the proposed working methods. The archipelago and the sea are used to frame exchange between Victoria, other European islands and mainland territories. The programme identifies cooperation with current, future and former ECoCs and includes Five Islands, Five Voices, Culture Next and a range of project-based partnerships. The final bid names cooperation with Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Oviedo, Jerez de la Frontera, Larnaca, Leuven, Nikšić, Lviv, Lublin, Budweis and Oulu, covering co-production, residencies, research, mobility, artistic exchange and

knowledge transfer. The panel noted that the European dimension has become more concrete since pre-selection, with a substantial number of identified partners and projects.

During the hearing, the candidate stated that around 260 partners and organisations were currently involved, with letters of intent from most of them. The next step was described as returning to these partners to define concrete pathways and responsibilities. The candidate also distinguished the proposed approach from a model in which international artists come to Victoria to perform and leave, stressing longer processes through which knowledge, skills and relationships remain in the community. The Islands Laboratory and the proposed European Islands Network were presented in this context, with common island challenges identified around mobility, retaining talent and climate change. The candidate referred to an informal network of five islands - Sardegna, Azzorre, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Arran and Victoria - and to the intention to formalise cooperation as its common objectives develop.

The hearing also tested the European added value of the proposal. Asked what Victoria expected to contribute to Europe and what it would like to be remembered for outside Malta, the candidate referred to archipelagic thinking, connecting artists and regions and giving greater visibility to island perspectives, as well as strengthening the capacity of Maltese cultural organisations to participate in European programmes. The panel noted that this describes a clear direction for Victoria's European engagement, while the emphasis in the answer remained partly on the benefits for Victoria and Gozo. The discussion concerning Tunisia and North Africa similarly indicated an intention to broaden cooperation beyond language-based projects towards more transversal artistic and institutional relationships. The panel noted the breadth of the proposed European and Mediterranean connections and the different stages of maturity of the partnerships and networks described.

Outreach

The final bid presents outreach as an integrated part of programme development rather than solely as an audience-building activity. It identifies residents, young people, migrants, international residents, older people, people with disabilities and groups with lower levels of participation, and proposes different routes of engagement through schools, NGOs, community organisations, voluntary structures and intermediary organisations. Volunteer31, Ġenerazzjoni 31, Youth Hub, Digital Storytelling and Audience-Centred Experience Design form part of this wider framework. The panel noted the development of this approach since pre-selection and the emphasis placed on building relationships before defining projects, particularly with communities that are less readily reached.

The hearing provided concrete examples of the intended approach. The candidate explained that approximately 60% of the programme had been submitted by committees and organisations and that projects developed with target groups could, where appropriate, be delegated back to those groups for implementation, including through the identification of leaders within them. The candidate described the preparation period as an effort to build trust and avoid token participation, with schools, young people and organisations already connected to particular communities acting as entry points. The candidate city also provided an example through Fragments of Memory, where young people were involved not only as participants but in interviews, documentation and video production. The panel noted that these elements

indicate a progression from consultation towards forms of co-creation and shared implementation.

The panel also examined the distinction between participation in cultural activity, participation in programme decisions and wider civic participation. During the hearing, the candidate linked capacity-building and collective working to democratic culture, while acknowledging that the proposal does not always use democratic participation as a separate terminology or programme strand. The bid includes indicators concerning reach, diversity, barriers to participation, access and well-being, and proposes longitudinal evaluation. The panel noted that the outreach model is broad and differentiated, but that its assessment of impact depends on demonstrating not only who participates but also how participation affects artistic choices, organisational practice and longer-term civic engagement. The combination of an established voluntary culture with a more structured engagement model is a central feature of the approach presented.

Management

The Victoria2031 Foundation is the principal structure presented for delivery of the ECoC. The final bid provides for a Board of Governors and Supervisory Council, an artistic team with responsibility for the programme, and progressive development of the organisation to approximately 39 staff by 2031. The proposed staffing structure covers programme production, cultural development and legacy, communications, administration and finance, research and international relations. The appointment of a CEO through a transparent process is planned for 2027. The panel noted that the organisational model is considerably more developed than at pre-selection and that responsibilities for artistic, financial and organisational functions are identified in the bid.

The hearing focused particularly on the relationship between the Foundation and public authorities and on the safeguards for artistic independence. The candidate stated that the Foundation is legally independent, with its own Board of Governors and Supervisory Council, and that the artistic team develops the programme independently, while the Board provides guidance concerning budget limits and feasibility. The candidate also referred to the planned classification of the Foundation as a public cultural organisation, which would allow direct national funding. The panel noted the proposed separation between public oversight and artistic responsibility, while also noting that some elements of the future institutional framework remain dependent on formal processes and agreements.

Financial and communications management were also examined during the hearing. The operating budget remains approximately €43.24 million, with the projected private-sector contribution revised from approximately €5 million to €3 million. The candidate explained that the revision followed further discussion with economic partners and was intended to reflect a more achievable level, while the final division between cash and in-kind support was not yet fixed. Public funding remains the principal source and is subject to Malta's multiannual public budgeting framework. The candidate expressed confidence in the continuation of the cultural allocation following discussions with the Ministry for Finance. The communication approach

combines a newsroom, multilingual content, community storytellers, diaspora links and European media partnerships.

Capacity to Deliver

The bid presents delivery capacity as the combination of existing local structures and the progressive development of professional capacity within the Victoria2031 Foundation. Political and institutional support is described across the Victoria Local Council, the Gozo Regional Council and other localities, while the Victoria Cultural Strategy 2026–2035 provides a local policy framework. The candidacy period has already included partnership development, pilot activities and capacity-building, and during the hearing an established culture of volunteering and intergenerational transmission of skills was further highlighted. The panel noted that this existing social and cultural infrastructure provides an important part of the context in which the ECoC organisation would operate.

The hearing nevertheless brought the scale of the delivery challenge into sharper focus. The candidate acknowledged limitations in resources, skills and experience and referred to risks ranging from organisational capacity to development pressures, including the possible relationship between building reuse, gentrification and overtourism. The volunteer strategy includes progression from volunteering towards greater responsibility and leadership, while the wider capacity-building framework addresses mapping, mobility, training and implementation. The panel noted that the proposed model seeks to combine community participation with a growing professional organisation, but that the scale and complexity of the programme will require substantial coordination between the Foundation, cultural organisations, public authorities, partners and volunteers.

Financial and infrastructural capacity were also discussed. The candidate referred to scalability as a principal mechanism for responding to financial disruption, explaining that projects can be developed at different expenditure levels. When asked how the approximately €30 million artistic programme budget had been established, the answer was that project stakeholders had budgeted the individual projects and that these had been subject to negotiation and contingency. Capital investment remains largely outside the Foundation’s operating budget and is to be delivered through public authorities and established funding mechanisms. The candidate stated that the museum is expected to open in 2027 and that other relevant infrastructure would be available before the principal programme implementation period. The panel noted that delivery capacity consequently depends on the parallel development of professional staffing, financial systems, partner capacity and the timely availability of relevant infrastructure.

Conclusion

Victoria’s final bid-book develops the concept of An Island of Islands across the six ECoC criteria, connecting the artistic programme with long-term cultural development, European cooperation, participation and organisational development. The programme is substantially

developed and rooted in the local cultural ecosystem, combining place-based work, contemporary artistic practice, participation and international cooperation. Its European dimension is supported by a broad network of partners and by the proposed island-to-island approach, while the panel noted that the European added value and the contribution Victoria intends to make to wider European cooperation are less fully articulated.
Outreach and audience development are embedded in the programme, with examples of engagement and co-creation already demonstrated, although the extent to which communities will influence programme and artistic decisions remains an important point of assessment. The governance and management framework has developed considerably, while questions remain around the practical safeguards for artistic independence, the consolidation of senior management capacity and the relationship between the Foundation and public authorities. Funding and delivery arrangements have also been further developed, including a revised private-sector target, a scalable approach to projects and planned infrastructure, with elements of the public funding framework, financial contingency and infrastructure dependencies still to be consolidated.

Overall, the panel considers that Victoria has further developed the bid since pre-selection and has established a coherent framework linking artistic development, community engagement, European cooperation and capacity-building. The final bid demonstrates substantial preparation and a clear understanding of the scale and complexity of the ECoC action. At the same time, the panel has identified a number of areas where greater definition will be important during the implementation period, particularly in relation to legacy and evaluation, the European Islands Network and European added value, artistic quality control and responsibilities, the practical operation of co-creation, governance and artistic independence, financial safeguards, professional capacity and infrastructure contingencies. The panel's recommendations for the preparation of Victoria for the title year are set out at the end of this report.

The panel's decision

The panel noted the significant development made since pre-selection and the seriousness with which the candidate city had responded to the recommendations of the pre-selection report. The panel reached consensus on the single candidate.
Accordingly, the panel recommends that Victoria be designated as the European Capital of Culture 2031 in Malta.
The final bidbook represents a substantial strengthening of the Victoria2031Għawdex proposal. The programme demonstrates significant artistic ambition, strong community engagement, extensive European and international partnerships, and a clear commitment to capacity building and long-term cultural development.
The panel considers that Victoria has demonstrated the commitment, ambition, developing capacity and team spirit required to take forward the European Capital of Culture 2031 project

and to use the title as a platform for long-term cultural development in Victoria and Gozo and for meaningful European cooperation.

Designation

This report is submitted to the Agency and the European Commission. In accordance with Article 11 of Decision No 445/2014/EU, the competent authority will designate Victoria to hold the title of European Capital of Culture in Malta in 2031 on the basis of the panel's recommendation and will inform the relevant European Union institutions and bodies.
The formal designation enables Victoria to use the title "European Capital of Culture 2031" in accordance with the applicable rules.

Melina Mercouri Prize

The panel recommends that the European Commission award the Melina Mercouri Prize to the designated city. The payment of the €1.5 million prize is, however, deferred until 2031, in line with Article 14 of the Decision No 445/2014/EU, and it is conditional. The ECoC Expert Panel will make a further recommendation to the European Commission in late 2030, at the end of the monitoring process, on whether to make the payment.
The conditions for the payment are as follows (Article 14):
The commitments made at the application stage shall be deemed to have been honoured by the designated city where no substantial change has been made to the programme and the strategy between the application stage and the year of the title, in particular where:

a. the budget has been maintained at a level capable of delivering a high-quality cultural programme in line with the application and the criteria;
b. the independence of the artistic team has been appropriately respected;
c. the European dimension has remained sufficiently strong in the final version of the cultural programme;
d. the marketing and communication strategy and the communication material used by the designated city clearly reflects the fact that the action is a Union action;
e. the plans for the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the title on the designated city are in place.

Reputation of an ECoC

A city awarded the ECoC title receives considerable international attention from the moment of selection, extending well beyond the ECoC year itself. It carries a responsibility to uphold the reputation of the ECoC brand, for the benefit of both previous and future titleholders. City administrations should be aware that decisions taken across all policy areas, not only in culture, may attract media and social media attention far beyond what they are accustomed to

handling. This visibility brings a new level of scrutiny to decision-making in the city across a broad range of issues, extending well beyond culture.

The monitoring phase

Once a city has been designated, it enters the Monitoring Phase (Article 13, Decision No 445/2014/EU). The panel shall monitor the preparation of the designated cities for the year of the title and provide them with support and guidance from the time of their designation to the beginning of the year of the title.
The final bidbook submitted for the selection becomes *de facto* the reference document for the implementation of the ECoC project. The panel expects the designated city to maintain close alignment with the commitments, programme, strategy, financing and governance arrangements set out in the bidbook and to take into account the recommendations contained in this report.
Significant changes to the artistic programme, strategy, budget or management arrangements should be discussed through the monitoring process in accordance with the applicable rules. The monitoring process will also pay particular attention to the European dimension, the independence of the artistic team, the quality and feasibility of the programme, the financial framework, communication, audience development, monitoring and evaluation, and the capacity of the organisation to deliver the commitments made in the bidbook.
There are three formal monitoring checkpoints (normally autumn 2027, mid 2029 and autumn 2030) when the ECoC will meet with the panel. Prior to each meeting the European Commission, on behalf of the panel, will invite the ECoC to provide progress reports. The Commission, after consultation with the panel, will indicate areas which specifically need to be addressed in the reports. In addition, the panel may decide to visit the city to observe progress. The panel's reports after all three meetings will be published on the Commission's website. The ECoC may decide to publish its own progress reports in the interests of transparency.

The panel's recommendations

The designated ECoC now moves into a transition period – from a structure suited to a bid campaign to a more formal ECoC delivery organisation that is independent of the local city administration. The panel expects Victoria to develop cooperation with other bidding cities and with the wider artistic and cultural community in Malta. The 2031 ECoC year in Malta provides a national opportunity, which will reflect internationally not only on Victoria and Gozo but also on the country as a whole. The panel will expect the first progress report in autumn 2027 to consider the recommendations and comments in the assessment of the bid, as stated above and below. The panel provides the following recommendations for the preparation and implementation of the European Capital of Culture year.

Recommendations for Victoria

1. The panel recommends that Victoria further develop and implement its **monitoring and evaluation framework**, ensuring that it is proportionate to the scale and specific context of Victoria and Gozo, owned by the city and its partners, and informed, where

relevant, by experience from previous European Capitals of Culture. The framework should cover the preparation period, the ECoC year and the years following 2031, with the monitoring strategy forming an integral part of a longer-term approach to assessing impact.

2. The panel encourages Victoria to give further consideration to what should remain after 2031, including the ambitions, structures, capacities and partnerships that the ECoC is intended to leave in place as **legacy**. This should include consideration of both opportunities and potential risks associated with the development generated by the title, including overtourism, gentrification and pressure on local resources.
3. The panel considers it important that the programme be translated into a clear and consistent proposition for the **wider public**, maintaining a strong connection between the overall concept, its different programme elements and the experience offered to audiences.
4. The panel encourages Victoria to reinforce the principle of **quality over quantity** across the programme, ensuring that the number and scale of projects remain compatible with the available artistic and organisational capacity and that a consistent curatorial standard can be maintained. In particular, clear minimum quality standards should guide the development and selection of projects still to be finalised.
5. The panel invites Victoria to further strengthen the **coherence** between the artistic concept and its delivery, ensuring that the programme's ambitions are matched by appropriate curatorial responsibility, production capacity and implementation planning.
6. The panel encourages Victoria to further strengthen the strategic focus on the **European dimension**, including by articulating more explicitly the distinctive contribution that Victoria and Gozo can make to European cultural cooperation and by exploring opportunities to broaden the ECoC's partnership network, including with partners in Northern Europe. In parallel, the panel recommends further developing and diversifying partnerships with North Africa and the wider MENA region, building on the 'in-between' position identified in the Introduction to the Bid-Book and considering how this geographical and cultural positioning can inform the ECoC's approach to international cultural cooperation.
7. The panel considers that the proposed **European network of islands** would benefit from further definition and consolidation. Victoria should clarify its scope, objectives, membership, criteria for participation, governance and the range of activities or exchanges to be developed through the network. The panel encourages Victoria to consider how such a network could contribute to a wider European strategy for islands, including by demonstrating how culture can contribute to addressing common island challenges and by strengthening opportunities for European cooperation and access to European funding.
8. The panel stresses the importance of maintaining **inclusion, participation, volunteering, intergenerational engagement and peer-to-peer knowledge transfer** as central elements of the ECoC legacy, and encourages Victoria to ensure that these principles are reflected consistently in programme development and delivery.
9. The panel recommends that Victoria develop a clearer framework for **co-creation with communities**, including greater clarity on how communities participate in shaping projects, how their contribution influences decisions, and how responsibility and ownership are transferred through the process.
10. The panel encourages Victoria to ensure continuity within the team and to give careful consideration to the **appointment of the CEO** and senior management, so that the future organisational structure remains consistent with the purpose and spirit of the

project developed during the candidature while providing the professional and operational experience required for delivery.

11. The panel considers it important that Victoria develop a **clear staffing and professional development plan**, identifying the roles and expertise required as the programme grows and ensuring that people with appropriate professional and operational experience are integrated into the core team. This should support both delivery capacity and the longer-term capacity-building ambitions of the ECoC.
12. The panel recommends that Victoria establishes a clear support system for **volunteers** from the outset, including appropriate training, professional coordination and clearly defined responsibilities. Particular attention should be given to creating pathways through which young people can progress from volunteering towards paid employment, leadership and other forms of professional development, thereby sustaining the strong community engagement on which the project is based.

Thanks

The panel wishes to place on record its thanks to the Ministry responsible for Culture, the Valletta Cultural Agency and everyone involved in the organisation of the competition. The panel also thanks the Victoria2031 team, the Victoria Local Council, the Gozo Regional Council, the Foundation, cultural practitioners, community organisations, volunteers and all those who contributed to the preparation and presentation of the final bid.
The panel appreciates the seriousness with which Victoria continued to develop its candidacy during the period between pre-selection and final selection. It wishes the city and its partners success in the preparation and implementation of the European Capital of Culture 2031 project.

Signed

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