



Frequently Asked Questions relating to the General Authorisation (GA) regime for maritime VHF radiocommunications equipment and EPIRBs installed on board Maltese-registered vessels (S.L.399.40)

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Q. 1 What was the reason for introducing the General Authorisation for VHF maritime equipment and EPIRBs?

- A. The General Authorisation or GA was introduced in 2008 to encourage all boat owners to install and use a VHF radio/EPIRB on board their vessels to improve the safety of life at sea and at the same time assist the Search and Rescue Authorities in cases of distress and emergency.

Q. 2 What is a General Authorisation?

- A. A general authorisation is the legal framework established by a law ensuring the rights to, in this case, install and operate specific radio equipment.

The general authorisation conditions for maritime VHF radios and EPIRBs are established by the General Authorisation (Radiocommunications Apparatus) Regulations (S.L.399.40) and do not carry any licence fees. However, an administrative fee applies with regard to the assignment of maritime identities as described in Q.5.

Q. 3 Can I install or use a maritime VHF radio or EPIRB from land?

- A. **No. It is illegal to install and/or use a maritime VHF radio or EPIRB from land.** In addition, it is also prohibited to use the said radio equipment when your boat is ashore. The use of any such equipment is strictly limited to when the boat is at sea.

Q. 4 What is a call sign and an MMSI?

- A. Call signs and Maritime Mobile Service Identities (MMSI) are limited identities, and it is therefore very important that they are only assigned as and when required. These identities are assigned to the vessel and not to the owner of the vessel/equipment and remain valid throughout the lifetime of the vessel, as long as the vessel remains registered under the Malta Flag. A call sign is a unique designation for the maritime VHF equipment. The MMSI is also unique, is composed of 9 digits and is assigned to vessels having Digital Selective Calling (DSC) enabled maritime VHF equipment and/or EPIRBs. The MMSI is sent automatically with each and every transmission in DSC mode. In the case of a DSC distress call, all DSC equipped radios within range will receive the DSC distress transmission.

Q. 5 What do I have to do when I purchase a new maritime VHF radio or EPIRB from a local dealer?

- A. When you purchase such equipment from a local dealer:
- A notification form to be made available by the dealer would need to be completed. The purpose of this form is to be assigned with the applicable maritime identities (MMSI and/or call sign). A copy of your ID card and a copy of your vessel's valid vessel registration certificate should be made available to the dealer to be attached to the notification form.
 - Generally, the duly completed form together with the above-mentioned documentation are sent by the dealer to the MCA (in case of all "S" registered and fishing vessels under 6 meters in overall length), or to Transport Malta (in case of "Valletta" registered vessels).
 - As soon as the above-mentioned documentation is received, either the MCA or Transport Malta (TM) will contact you for being assigned with the said identities.
 - If the vessel has never been assigned with a Maltese call sign and/or MMSI, the vessel will be assigned with a call sign/MMSI as appropriate.
 - The assignment of a call sign/MMSI carries a one-time payment of €55.
 - The relevant entity will provide you with a certificate indicating which call sign/MMSI has been assigned to your vessel.
If you have applied for an MMSI, you will then need to take the certificate and the VHF radio/EPIRB to the relevant dealer for being programmed with the assigned identity.

The procedure relating to equipment not purchased from a local dealer is available in Q.12.

Q. 6 I am in possession of / intend to purchase / have purchased a maritime handheld VHF DSC radio. What do I need to do?

- A. The procedure for registering this type of equipment is very similar to that described under Q.5 above with the only difference that identities are assigned to handheld VHF DSC radios and NOT to the vessel or its registered owner.

Each individual handheld VHF DSC radio is assigned by MCA/TM with a unique identity (not an MMSI) and this should be programmed into the said radio.

A handheld VHF DSC radio should NEVER be programmed with the MMSI assigned to a vessel.

Q. 7 I am in possession of a maritime handheld VHF DSC radio and already programmed it with the assigned identity. Should I strictly use my radio only from on board my vessel?

- A. No. Handheld VHF DSC radios may be used from on board any Maltese-registered vessel, on condition that the vessel from which it is being used is duly assigned with a call sign.

It is to be stressed that in accordance with the General Authorisation, it **is illegal to use a maritime handheld VHF DSC radio from land.**

Q. 8 What is the purpose of the emergency contact details ashore provided to MCA/TM?

- A. The details provided to MCA/TM are submitted to the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) for situations involving search and rescue operations.

In this regard it should be ensured that these details are kept up-to-date to ensure an effective action by the AFM in search and rescue operations. Therefore, MCA/TM should **always** be notified when a vessel changes ownership or when the registered owner of a handheld VHF DSC radio is no longer in control of his/her radio equipment.

Q. 9 Can I apply for maritime identities¹ prior to purchasing my radio equipment?

- A. No. If you do not submit the required documentation to MCA/TM, the relevant maritime identities will not be assigned.

Q. 10 My vessel is already assigned with the required Maltese maritime identities. Will I need to pay for these identities?

- A. No. The new fee only applies to new assignments of maritime identities.

Q. 11 Is there a limit on the number of VHF radios that I can install on board my vessel?

- A. No, however it is of utmost importance that you always follow the conditions of use set out in the general authorisation.

Q. 12 I intend to purchase my maritime radio equipment from abroad². What do I have to do?

- A. The MCA strongly recommends that prior to procuring any radio equipment from abroad you contact our office for technical advice. This would minimise the risks of importing equipment which is not compliant with national legislation. After purchasing the equipment from abroad you need to follow the procedure set out in Q.13.

¹ The term "maritime identities" refers to a Call Sign or MMSI or identity for a handheld VHF DSC radio.

² This relates to but is not limited to purchases from the Internet or radio equipment which is installed on board an imported vessel. Equipment which is not found to be compliant with the conditions of the General Authorisation cannot be allowed to be installed or used in Malta.

Q. 13 I am already in possession of a VHF radio obtained from abroad. What do I have to do to get things in order and apply for the required maritime identities?

- A. First, it has to be established that your equipment complies with the relevant technical and regulatory conditions of the General Authorisation. This is carried out through basic tests on the equipment at the MCA labs. In this regard you should contact the MCA to set an appointment in order for the said tests to be carried out.

If the radio is found not to be compliant with the regulations, the said radio cannot be installed or used on board Maltese-registered vessels.

Q. 14 My VHF was purchased in an EU member state / was previously installed on a vessel registered under an EU flag. Can my radio be automatically be used in Malta?

- A. No. You must still follow the procedure under Q.13.

Q. 15 My VHF radio has been sealed by the MCA or the former Wireless Telegraphy Department. With the introduction of the GA am I allowed to break the seal and start using my radio?

- A. No. Due to technical reasons the sealing can only be broken by MCA officials. In this regard you should bring your VHF radio to the MCA for unsealing purposes. Your radio will then be tested at the MCA in order to ensure that it complies with the relevant technical and regulatory conditions of the General Authorisation.

Q. 16 I do not need to use my VHF radio anymore. Do I have to bring it to the MCA for sealing or destruction?

- A. No. You may still keep your radio but you have to comply with the conditions set out in the GA.

Q. 17 I intend to sell my VHF radio (without the vessel) to third parties, do I still need to advise the Authority and fill in transfer letters etc?

- A. **Remember that both call signs and MMSI are not transferable between vessels!**

If your radio is DSC enabled and is programmed with an MMSI, you are required to de-programme the said identity. If the vessel of the new owner has not been assigned with an MMSI, the new owner must apply for a new identity at the relevant entity.

Both you and the new owner do not need to complete any transfer letters.

If your equipment is a handheld VHF DSC radio, the new owner of the radio shall notify the MCA with his/her contact details as well as the emergency contact details ashore (see Q.8).

Q. 18 I intend to buy a VHF radio (without the vessel) from third parties, do I still need to advise the MCA and fill in transfer letters etc?

- A. **It is very important that if the VHF radio is DSC enabled and is programmed with an MMSI belonging to another vessel, you confirm that the radio has been de-programmed from the MMSI assigned to the previous vessel.**

Once the MMSI assigned to the previous vessel has been de-programmed, you will then be able to program your radio with the MMSI assigned to your vessel. If your vessel has still not been assigned with an MMSI, you may apply for one at your respective registration authority.

No transfer letters are required, either by you or the previous owner.

If the equipment is a handheld VHF DSC radio you shall notify the MCA with your contact details as well as the emergency contact details ashore (see Q.8).

Q. 19 I intend to sell my VHF radio (together with the vessel) to third parties, do I still need to advise you and fill in transfer letters etc?

- A. **Always remember that both call signs and MMSI are assigned for the lifetime of a vessel – it is irrelevant if there are changes in ownership.**

In this case, the same call sign / MMSI will still apply. If the new owner intends to buy a new VHF DSC radio, the latter must be programmed with the already assigned MMSI. However, the new owner is strongly recommended to update either the MCA or TM with his/her emergency contact details ashore.

If your equipment is a handheld VHF DSC radio, the new owner of the radio shall notify the MCA with his/her contact details as well as the emergency contact details ashore (see Q.8).

Q. 20 Beside the VHF radio, I am also in possession of an MF/HF transceiver and/or satellite terminal. Does the GA apply to me?

- A. No. The current licensing procedures will still apply, i.e. your equipment will still need to be individually licensed. Such licences are issued by the Merchant Shipping Directorate of Transport Malta.

Q. 21 I have an MF/HF and/or satellite terminal. Do I have to pay for the required maritime identities?

- A. No. In this case, the administrative cost of assigning maritime identities is already covered by your annual radio licence fee.

Q. 22 I am a ship agent and my foreign client is in possession of a provisional licence. Since my client is not technically competent, how can he decide if the GA applies to him or not?

- A. The ship owner must commission a survey report to be compiled by a competent technician / entity / surveyor which will identify the type of radio equipment installed on board.

Q. 23 I have just registered a vessel under the Malta flag. The vessel was previously registered with a foreign flag and the radio equipment was purchased and installed abroad. What do I need to do?

- A. You should contact the MCA and make an appointment for your equipment to be tested. After the required tests are carried out, you will be given a test report, which will confirm or otherwise whether the said radio equipment may be used or not in Malta (see Q.13).

In these cases it is highly probable that if your equipment is DSC enabled, it is programmed with a foreign MMSI. In such cases you need to follow the procedure in Q.18. After you have been assigned with a Maltese MMSI you will need to have this identity programmed in your DSC enabled equipment and/or the EPIRB.

Q. 24 My marine VHF radio/EPIRB has been lost / stolen / is inoperable. Do I need to submit any documentation (e.g. police report / declaration)?

- A. No. There is no need to submit any documentation and you do not need to inform the Authority. In case of inoperable EPIRBs, it is advised to disconnect its battery in order to eliminate the risk of false alerts.

Q. 25 I am in possession of / intend to purchase / have purchased a satellite EPIRB. What do I need to do?

- A. Owners of satellite EPIRBs must contact the Merchant Shipping Directorate within Transport Malta (TM) in order to register this equipment and if applicable, apply for an MMSI. This applies for **all** EPIRB owners even if the vessel is "S" registered or Fishing.

Note: If a vessel has been assigned with an MMSI for the VHF DSC radio, the same identity should be programmed in the EPIRB. A vessel may only be assigned with one Call Sign and one MMSI.

Once the EPIRB is programmed, the programming report should be sent to TM.

Q. 26 My marine VHF radio is programmed with a private frequency/ies assigned by the MCA. How is the introduction of the GA going to effect me?

- A. Your individual licence is still required since the General Authorisation does not apply to VHF equipment assigned with a private frequency/ies. Therefore the relevant licences fees as set out in the regulations would still need to be paid upon each anniversary of your licence.

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**General Authorisation (Radiocommunications Apparatus) Regulations
(S.L.399.40):**

<http://www.mjha.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11475&l=1>
