



# CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

## Strategic approach to managing spectrum bands for expiring rights of use

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## List of Abbreviations

Term	Definition
900 MHz band	The 880-915 MHz band paired with the 925-960 MHz band
1800 MHz band	The 1710-1785 MHz band paired with the 1805-1880 MHz band
2 GHz band	The paired and unpaired 2 GHz bands
26 GHz band	The 24.25-27.5 GHz band
42 GHz band	The 40.5-43.5 GHz band
5G SA	5G standalone
BEREC	Body of European Regulatory for Electronic Communications
DNA	Digital Networks Act
Epic	Epic Communications Limited
FDD	Frequency Division Duplex
GO	GO plc
Melita	Melita Limited
MNOs	Mobile network operators
Paired 2 GHz band	The 1920-1980 MHz band paired with the 2110-2170 MHz band
TDD	Time Division Duplex
Unpaired 2 GHz band	The 1900-1920 MHz unpaired band
WBB ECS	Wireless broadband electronic communications services

## 1 Executive Summary

This consultation document sets out the Malta Communications Authority's ('MCA') strategic approach for the management of radio spectrum bands with nearing expiry dates, specifically the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz and 2.1 GHz bands.

The MCA proposes to extend the existing rights of use within these bands until the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2033. This approach aims to establish a single expiry date for all frequency bands below the 3 GHz band, designated for the provision of terrestrial systems capable of providing wireless broadband electronic communications services ('WBB ECS'). The MCA considers that a converged timeline leading to the expiry of all licences on the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2033 will enable mobile network operators ('MNOs') to better develop their business, technology and spectrum management roadmaps, particularly as they navigate the expected decommissioning of legacy technologies.

Furthermore, through this process, the MCA is inviting stakeholders to express their interest in the potential utilisation of harmonised millimetre bands, specifically the 26 GHz and 42 GHz bands, for the future provision of WBB ECS.

## 2 Introduction

The current regulatory framework for the assignment of radio spectrum in the 900 MHz and 1800 MHz bands was established by Decision No. MCA/10/44/D<sup>1</sup>. The rights of use in these bands, granted in August 2011, are set to expire in 2026 and 2028<sup>2</sup>. The licences adhere to the principles of service and technology neutrality, with the technical framework aligned with Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/173<sup>3</sup>.

While the 900 MHz band is currently fully assigned and utilised, a significant portion of the 1800 MHz band<sup>4</sup> remains unassigned due to limited market demand (refer to Figure 1). This unassigned capacity is currently administered under Decision No. MCA/D/17-2971, as amended.

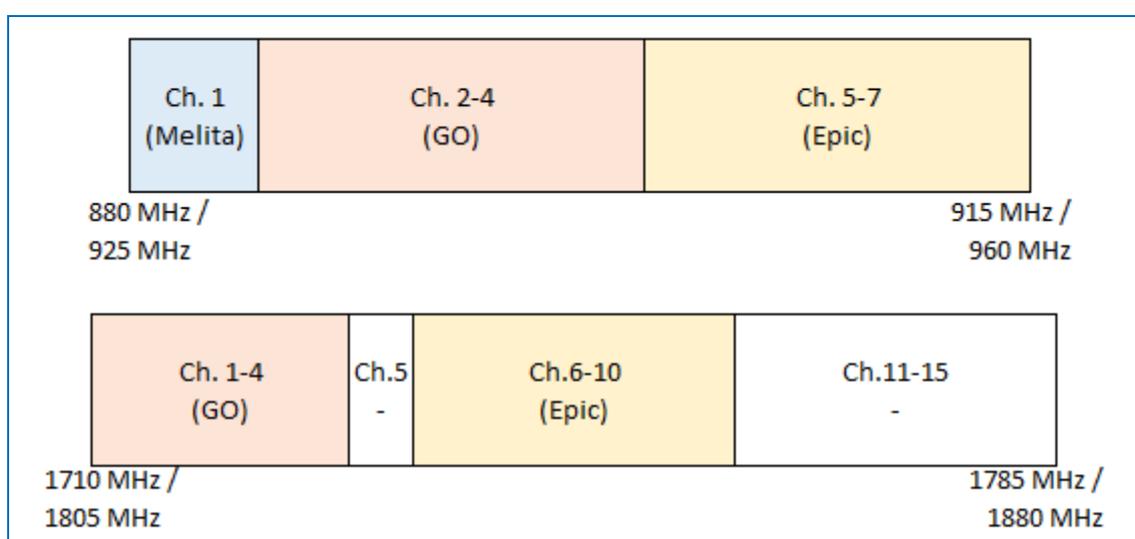


Figure 1: Overview of the 900 MHz and 1800 MHz spectrum assignments

The rights of use of radio spectrum in the 2 GHz band were issued in August 2005 for a fifteen (15) year term, in accordance with a joint policy and strategy document published by the Government and the MCA<sup>5</sup>. These rights were subsequently extended and are now also due to expire in August 2026. The extensions were granted following consultation processes conducted in accordance with statutory requirements. An overview of the current 2 GHz band spectrum holdings is provided in Figure 2.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mca.org.mt/decision-updating-spectrum-management-frameworks-900-mhz-1800-mhz-and-25-ghz-bands>.

<sup>2</sup> The rights of use expiring in 2028 refers to one paired 5 MHz channel in the 900 MHz band.

<sup>3</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec\\_impl/2022/173/oj/eng](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec_impl/2022/173/oj/eng).

<sup>4</sup> 40% of the 1800 MHz band is unassigned.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mca.org.mt/articles/policy-and-implementation-strategy-regarding-dttv-3g-and-bwa>.

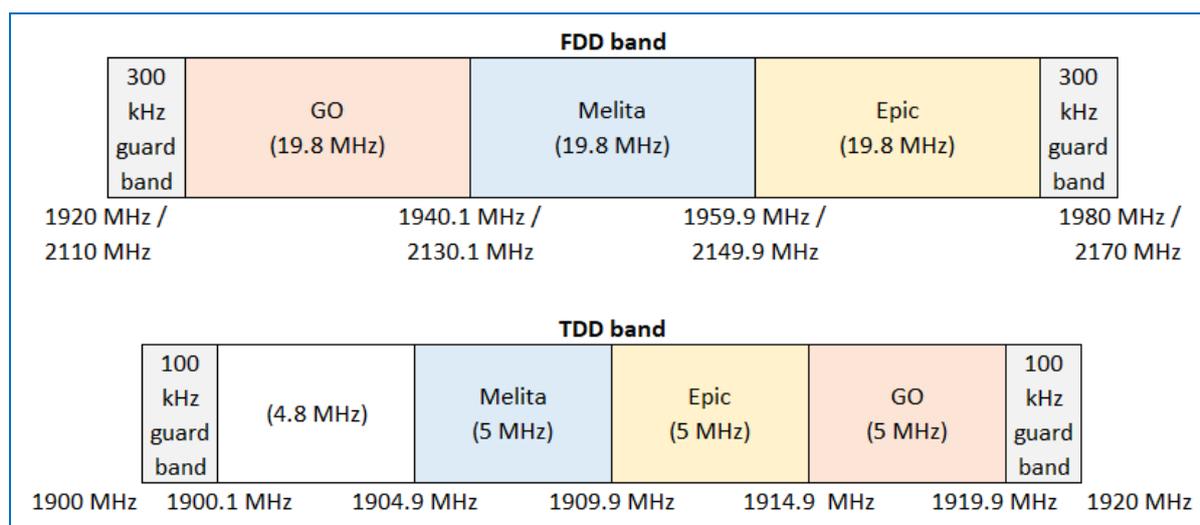


Figure 2: Overview of the 2 GHz band spectrum assignments

Besides these bands, MNOs hold additional spectrum rights in other frequency ranges, as detailed in Table 1 below.

Frequency band	Licence holders	Licence expiry date
800 MHz	Epic GO Melita	8 April 2033
2.5 GHz (FDD component)	Epic GO	8 April 2033
2.5 GHz (TDD component)	Epic	8 April 2033
3.6 GHz	Epic GO Melita	25 August 2036 24 October 2036 16 May 2036

Table 1: Information on the MNOs spectrum assignments in other frequency bands

In line with its obligation to provide regulatory certainty and predictability, the MCA is proposing an approach to ensure the continuity of spectrum use for those holdings expiring in 2026 and 2028. Specifically, the MCA intends to extend these licences until the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2033. During the interim period, comprehensive spectrum management frameworks and roadmaps for the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz, 2 GHz, and 2.5 GHz bands shall be developed ensuring alignment with the regulatory environment prevailing at that time.

Concurrent with these efforts, the MCA is also required to establish the management framework for the 42 GHz band in support of WBB services, in accordance with Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2024/1983<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, the MCA hereby invites market participants to provide information regarding potential interest in the 42 GHz band, including anticipated deployment timelines. Furthermore, the MCA welcomes renewed feedback on market interest for the 26 GHz band, another millimetre wave band designated as a '5G pioneer band'<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/102533>.

<sup>7</sup> Within the European framework, the designated '5G pioneer bands' are the 700 MHz, 3.6 GHz, and 26 GHz frequency bands. Please refer to Decision No. MCA/D/21-4177.

### 3 Strategic drivers and market considerations

The mobile electronic communications sector is currently undergoing a period of profound transformation, driven by rapid technological shifts and evolving socio-economic demands. The regulatory landscape is also set to evolve with the upcoming Digital Networks Act, which is expected to modernise certain spectrum management approaches across the EU. In this context, the EU's Digital Decade 2030 Policy Programme remains a central driver, steering the transition towards a ubiquitous gigabit society where high-capacity connectivity is accessible to all.

A high-level overview of these transformational drivers is outlined below.

- Legacy Network Sunsets: There is an accelerating global trend towards the decommissioning of 2G and 3G technologies. This sunset process provides various benefits in terms of cost savings, sustainability, network rationalisation. Particularly, it facilitates significant spectral efficiency gains.

In this context, it should be underlined that according to the Electronic Communications Networks and Services (General) Regulations (S.L.399.48 of the Laws of Malta) ('SL 399.48'), the decision to sunset legacy networks remains a prerogative of MNOs, in accordance with the principles of service and technology neutrality. Nonetheless, pursuant to regulation 33 of SL 399.48, the MCA maintains the authority to mandate the provision of specific electronic communications services or technologies should they be deemed necessary to fulfil specific general interest objectives.

- Transition to 5G Standalone: The Digital Decade programme seeks to accelerate the deployment of 5G standalone networks ('5G SA'), moving beyond the initial non-standalone phase. This transition is critical for the realisation of high-reliability, low latency applications and network slicing. Such evolution requires substantial, long-term capital commitment from MNOs and may necessitate additional spectrum resources to optimising network capacity and performance.

It is noted that the transition to 5G SA is currently progressing at a slower pace in Europe in comparison to other regions<sup>8</sup>.

- Transition to 6G: While the industry's immediate focus remains on the 5G optimisation of coverage and quality-of-service, the initial research and pre-standardisation phases for 6G ('IMT-2030') are already underway, with commercial deployment anticipated around 2030. Forward-looking spectrum planning must account for these post-2030 requirements to ensure that national infrastructure remains at the forefront of global innovation.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/116741>.

- Economic Impacts: The economic implications of spectrum management decisions require rigorous analysis to evaluate their potential for driving sector growth and delivering broader societal benefits.
- Market Trends: Recent industry intelligence indicates a decline in European spectrum-related revenues and stagnant Average Revenue Per User ('ARPU') compared to other global markets. These trends often fail to reflect the significant returns on investment required for the comprehensive deployment of 5G infrastructure<sup>9</sup>.
- Security and Privacy: Ensuring the security and privacy of communications infrastructure is paramount. As networks become more software-defined, MNOs must incorporate advanced strategies to safeguard against emerging cyber threats and ensure national resilience.
- Elevating quality of service and performance standards: Spectrum management regulation is evolving beyond a primary focus on coverage to align with the EU Digital Decade 2030 performance objectives. Consistent with the State of the Digital Decade 2025 assessment and BEREC's strategic emphasis on very high capacity networks, the regulatory trajectory is increasingly defined by the pursuit of gigabit level performance benchmarks<sup>10,11</sup>.
- Artificial Intelligence: The integration of artificial intelligence ('AI') and machine learning has emerged as a fundamental driver in reshaping how mobile networks are planned, operated and optimised. The journey toward AI-native networks requires a harmonised regulatory horizon to support the necessary investments.

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<sup>9</sup> These trends are generic and are provided in the context of Europe and not of Malta.

<sup>10</sup> <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/europes-digital-decade>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.berec.europa.eu/en/all-documents/berec/berec-strategies-and-work-programmes/berec-strategy-2026-2030>.

## 4 Proposed measures

The MCA's spectrum management functions are governed by the Malta Communications Authority Act (Cap. 418 of the Laws of Malta) and the Electronic Communications (Regulation) Act (Cap. 399 of the Laws of Malta). Under this legislative framework, the MCA is required to manage the radio frequency spectrum effectively while ensuring regulatory certainty and predictability for all market participants.

In exercising its duties, the MCA seeks to maintain a stable environment that fosters long-term investments and supports the strategic evolution of electronic communications networks. Accordingly, the measures outlined below aim to adapt current spectrum management practices to the strategic shifts detailed above in Section 3.

### 4.1 Proposed alignment of licence expiry dates

In accordance with its obligations to provide a clear and predictable regulatory horizon, the MCA considers it essential to address the upcoming expiry of the spectrum rights in the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz and 2 GHz frequency bands. The MCA recognises that the current fragmentation in the licence expiry dates can create administrative complexity and investment hesitancy during a critical period of technological shift. Furthermore, this approach accounts for the anticipated evolution of overarching regulatory framework, driven by the upcoming DNA.

In view of these considerations, the MCA proposes to extend the validity of all current rights of use in the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz and 2 GHz frequency bands to a common expiry date of the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2033. The MCA considers this proposal to be fully aligned with its strategic objectives of ensuring regulatory certainty and providing an adequate 'transition window' to manage effectively any planned decommissioning of legacy networks. In addition, this will enable the MCA to develop holistic spectrum management frameworks.

#### **Question 1:**

Do you agree with the proposal to extend the current rights of use for the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz and the 2 GHz bands to a harmonised expiry date of 8 April 2033?

Please provide a detailed justification in case of disagreement.

## 4.2 Framework for the conditions attached to the grants of rights of use

The MCA is proposing to maintain the existing regulatory obligations attached to the rights of use in the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz and 2 GHz bands. The MCA does not intend to amend or vary the prevailing technical and operational conditions during the extension period. However, in view of the strategic transition toward next-generation networks discussed in Section 3, the MCA considers it necessary to introduce a specific administrative requirement to ensure the continued protection of end-users.

While the MCA reaffirms that the sunsetting of legacy technologies remains a commercial and technical prerogative of the licensees consistent with the principle of technology neutrality, the MCA has a statutory duty to safeguard end-user interests and ensure service continuity.

To this end, the MCA proposes to include a new licence condition requiring licensees to provide a formal written notification to the MCA at least thirty-six (36) months in advance of the scheduled decommissioning or switch-off of any legacy mobile technology.

Such an early notification will:

- a) allow the MCA to assess the potential impact on end-users, particularly those relying on legacy-dependent services and to oversee the adequacy of the operator's communication and migration plans; and
- b) provide the MCA with sufficient time to determine if specific regulatory interventions are required to mitigate service disruptions.

In addition, in the interim period between the formal notification and the actual decommissioning date, licensees shall keep the MCA informed of the decommissioning progress through regular updates. To this end, such progress reporting shall include, but shall not be limited to, the following information:

- i) Detailed migration plans: A technical and operational roadmap outlining how the licensee intends to transition traffic and services from legacy network to 4G/5G equivalent infrastructure enduring coverage and quality parity.
- ii) Inventory of affected devices: An updated assessment of the number of mobile devices (including IoT/M2M) still active on the legacy network.
- iii) Communication plans: A schedule of planned outreach activities to ensure that all affected end-users are given sufficient notice and clear instructions on the steps required to maintain service continuity.

To ensure continued market stability during the proposed extension period, the MCA seeks to provide clarity regarding the financial obligations and the flexibility afforded to licensees concerning their assigned spectrum holdings.

### **Continuity of Licence Fees**

In accordance with its objective to provide a predictable investment environment, the prevailing licence fee structure established under the Twelfth Schedule, Part B of the Electronic Communications Networks and Services (General) Regulations (S.L. 399.48) will remain in force.

The MCA confirms that the existing fee levels, as currently published and applied, shall remain applicable throughout the duration of the extended licence period. This approach is intended to minimise unforeseen administrative costs for operators and ensure their investment plans for infrastructure as well as their network and service optimisation activities, remain unaffected.

### **Spectrum Hand back Clauses**

The MCA reaffirms that there will be no variations to the provisions regarding the voluntary return (hand back) of assigned radio spectrum by the holders of the rights of use in the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz and 2 GHz bands during the extended period. It is important to emphasise that the voluntary return of spectrum does not nullify existing financial liabilities. The exercise of the right to terminate the rights of use, pursuant to the applicable articles of the licence, does not exonerate the holder from the obligation to pay any licence fees which may be due pursuant to S.L. 399.48.

Nonetheless, the MCA wishes to clarify that, in view of the specific fee and assignment structure of the 2 GHz band, the hand back of partial rights within this band is not possible. Unlike other bands where spectrum may be returned on a per-channel basis, the 2 GHz band rights were granted as a unified block comprising of a 19.8 MHz FDD and 5 MHz TDD components.

Consequently, any request to hand back spectrum in the 2 GHz band must pertain to the entirety of the assigned block (all-or-none) as the current administrative and financial framework does not permit the partial hand back of spectrum in that band. This position reflects the views expressed by industry during the consultation procedure undertaken in 2019 under document MCA/C/19-3660.

#### **Question 2:**

Do you agree with the proposal to introduce a requirement for holders of grants of rights of use in the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz and 2 GHz bands to formally notify the MCA **at least** thirty-six (36) months in advance of switching-off any legacy technology and a continuous monitoring obligation?

Please provide a detailed justification in case of disagreement.

### 4.3 MCA work programme and roadmap to 2033

The proposed extension to the grants of rights of use for the above-mentioned frequency bands till the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2033 is intended to provide industry with the necessary regulatory stability to navigate current transformational shifts. This extension also marks the commencement of a multi-year strategic programme designed to culminate in a comprehensive spectrum assignment process which ensures that the future spectrum management framework is aligned with market needs.

To ensure transparency and predictability, the following details the high-level tasks that the MCA plans to undertake, together with the respective indicative milestones (refer to Figure 3).

- **Phase 1 – licence extension process**  
Publication of the current consultation, analysis of responses and issuance of the extended licences.
- **Phase 2 – market intelligence**  
Launch of a formal ‘request for input’ to capture operator technology roadmaps, followed by bilateral discussions. The information will be requested pursuant to article 4(10) of the Malta Communications Authority Act (Cap. 418 of the Laws of Malta).
- **Phase 3 – crafting of the new spectrum management framework**  
Internal development of the technical framework, pricing models and key conditions, including the spectrum packages
- **Phase 4 – approval seeking process**  
Formal coordination with Government to secure approval on the proposed licence fees.
- **Phase 5 – consultation procedures**  
A multi-stage consultation process, including with the Radio Spectrum Policy Group and stakeholder workshops to refine MCA’s proposals.
- **Phase 6 – the award moment**  
The statutory assignment procedure, including the binding call for applications and issuance of the grant of rights of use in the 900 MHz, 1800 MHz and 2 GHz bands. This phase of the process is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2031 to provide a sufficient time window for licensees to adapt to the new framework.

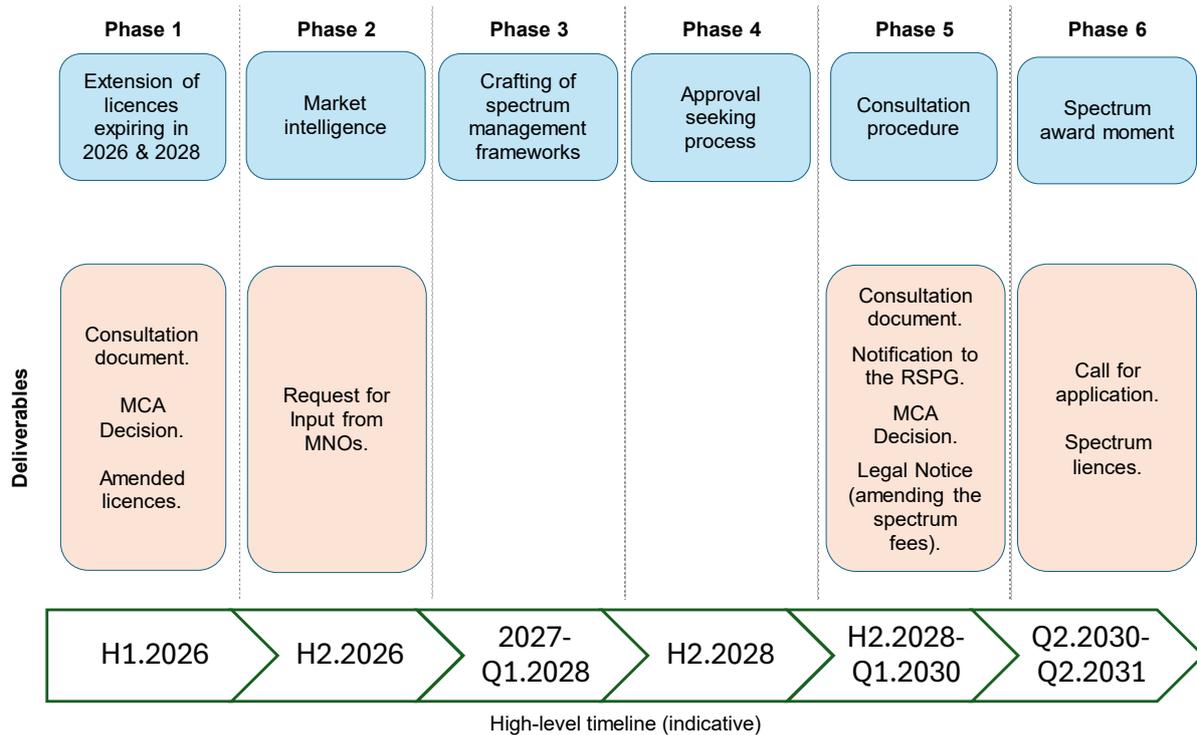


Figure 3: MCA's high-level work plan

**Question 3:**

Do you consider MCA's work plan, including the indicated timeline, to be sufficient for your strategic planning and investment cycles?

Please justify your response in case of disagreement with MCA's workplan and timelines.

## 4.4 Market inquiry on EU harmonised millimetre wave spectrum

In line with Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2024/1983, the 42 GHz band has been harmonised across the European Union for terrestrial systems capable of WBB ECS. This EU Decision provides a common technical framework that enables large contiguous blocks of spectrum, ideal for delivering multi-gigabit speeds in a campus environment.

Through this consultation, the MCA invites stakeholders to provide updated market intelligence regarding their interest in these bands. This information will be instrumental in determining the MCA's assignment strategy. Specifically, the MCA welcomes feedback on deployment use cases and technology readiness.

In addition, the MCA is also seeking the market's interest for using the 26 GHz frequency band, a band already made available for WBB ECS in 2021 through Decision No. MCA/D/21-4177<sup>12</sup>.

### Question 4:

Please indicate whether you are interested in acquiring rights of use in the 26 GHz and/or the 42 GHz bands for WBB ECS.

Within what timeframe would you anticipate a commercial requirement for this spectrum?

In addition, the MCA welcomes the opportunity of receiving your views on deployment use cases and technology readiness for these two frequency bands.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.mca.org.mt/consultations-decisions/additional-spectrum-wireless-broadband-electronic-communications-services-0>.

## 5 Consultation framework

In accordance with its obligations under article 4A of the Malta Communications Authority Act (Cap. 418 of the Laws of Malta), the MCA welcomes written comments and representations from stakeholders during the consultation period which shall run from the 17 March 2026 to the 17 April 2026.

For the sake of clarity and ease of understanding, the MCA encourages stakeholders to structure their comments in line with the section numbers and sub-section numbers used throughout this document.

The MCA appreciates that respondents may provide confidential information in their feedback to this consultation document. This information is to be included in a separate annex and should be clearly marked as confidential. Respondents are also requested to state why the information should be treated as confidential.

For the sake of transparency, the MCA will publish a list of all respondents to this consultation. The MCA will take the necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of all such material in accordance with the MCA's confidentiality guidelines and procedures. Respondents are however encouraged to avoid confidential markings wherever possible.

All responses should be submitted to the MCA in writing by no later than **12.00hrs. CET** on the **17 April 2026** and addressed to the:

Chief of Spectrum Management and Technology  
Malta Communications Authority  
Valletta Waterfont, Pinto Wharf, Floriana FRN1913, Malta

Email: [spectrum.mca@mca.org.mt](mailto:spectrum.mca@mca.org.mt)

Extensions to the consultation deadline will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances and then only if the MCA deems fit. The MCA reserves the right to grant or refuse any such requests at its discretion. Requests for extensions are to be made in writing within the first ten (10) working days of the consultation period.



MALTA COMMUNICATIONS AUTHORITY

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