



# Study visit to the San Patrignano Community

## RIMINI, ITALY

**7<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> April 2026**

A Community-Based Model for Rehabilitation,  
Social Inclusion and Human Development

Report Prepared by



**Local Councils'  
Association**

Assoċjazzjoni Kunsilli Lokali Malta





SanPatrignano



## Foreword

The Local Councils' Association remains committed to creating opportunities for local and regional leaders, public officers, and community practitioners to learn from innovative models that strengthen communities and improve quality of life.

In this spirit, the Association organised a study visit to the San Patrignano Community in Rimini, Italy, bringing together representatives of local government, social services, regional governance, and law enforcement. The objective was to gain first-hand insight into one of Europe's most recognised community-based rehabilitation models and to examine how its principles may contribute to ongoing discussions concerning social inclusion, rehabilitation, community resilience, and local governance in Malta and Gozo.

What follows is not simply a record of a study visit. It is a reflection on the lessons learned, the experiences shared, and the questions raised about how communities can support individuals facing vulnerability, addiction, exclusion, and personal hardship.



## Way Forward

**By Mario Fava**

President, Local Councils' Association

As we conclude this study visit to San Patrignano, I believe that the greatest value of this experience lies not only in what we have seen, but in what we choose to do with the knowledge and insights we have gained.



Throughout these two days, we witnessed a powerful example of how communities can become agents of transformation. We saw first-hand that recovery is not merely about overcoming addiction. It is about restoring dignity, rebuilding confidence, creating opportunities, and helping individuals rediscover their place within society. Above all, we saw how human potential can flourish when individuals are provided with structure, responsibility, support, and belief.

The lessons emerging from San Patrignano are particularly relevant for all those involved in local governance and community leadership. As local councils, regional councils, social service providers, law enforcement agencies, educators, and community organisations, we all share a responsibility to create environments where people can thrive and where vulnerable individuals are not left behind.

While we recognise that the San Patrignano model was developed within a unique context and over many decades, the principles underpinning its success are universal. The importance of community, meaningful participation, personal responsibility, vocational development, social support, and long-term commitment are lessons that can inspire our thinking and inform future discussions within Malta and Gozo.

As the Local Councils' Association, we intend to build upon this experience by continuing to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among all stakeholders involved in promoting social wellbeing and community resilience. We will seek opportunities to strengthen knowledge exchange, encourage further learning experiences, and support initiatives that place people at the centre of community development.

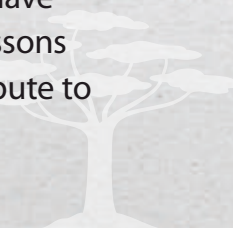
The reflections shared by participants throughout this report demonstrate that this visit has already achieved something significant. It has challenged perceptions, encouraged reflection, strengthened professional networks, and inspired many of us to think differently about rehabilitation, prevention, social inclusion, and community engagement.

Moving forward, we should continue exploring how local communities can contribute to prevention efforts, support social inclusion, encourage active participation, and foster stronger partnerships between institutions. The experiences shared by the residents of San Patrignano remind us that lasting change is possible when individuals are provided with opportunities and when communities choose to invest in people rather than simply respond to problems.

This study visit marks the beginning of a wider conversation. It is my hope that the relationships built, the experiences shared, and the lessons learned will continue to influence our work and inspire future initiatives that strengthen the wellbeing of our communities.

Our vision remains clear: Residents First – Better Quality of Life. Achieving this vision requires us to look beyond infrastructure and services and focus equally on the human dimension of community life. It requires us to build communities that are inclusive, compassionate, resilient, and supportive of those who need us most.

The message we bring back from San Patrignano is simple but powerful: transformation is possible. We have seen it, we have heard it, and we have experienced it. The challenge before us now is to ensure that these lessons continue to inspire positive action within our communities and contribute to a better future for all.



## Introduction

San Patrignano is widely recognised as one of Europe's largest and most established rehabilitation communities. Founded in 1978, it has developed into a self-sustaining community that provides individuals recovering from addiction with a structured environment centred on responsibility, dignity, education, vocational training, and community participation.

The visit provided delegates with an opportunity to observe the daily functioning of the community, engage with residents and management, and better understand the philosophy underpinning its rehabilitation model.

Participants included local councillors, executive secretaries, representatives from the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, members of the Malta Police Force Drug Squad, and regional representatives. The diversity of the delegation reflected the understanding that addiction and social exclusion cannot be addressed by a single institution alone but require cooperation across multiple sectors.





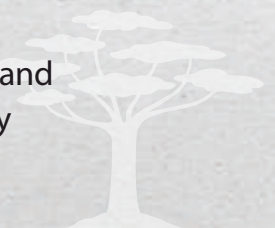
## Understanding Addiction Beyond Treatment

One of the first lessons emerging from the visit was the way San Patrignano approaches addiction.

Rather than viewing addiction exclusively through a medical lens, the community recognises it as a complex interaction between social, emotional, behavioural, psychological, and environmental factors. Recovery is therefore understood not merely as abstinence from substances but as a process of personal transformation.

Delegates repeatedly observed that the model focuses on rebuilding lives rather than simply treating addiction. This perspective resonated strongly with participants. Denise Farrugia reflected on how communities have the capacity both to contribute to personal trauma and, equally, to become places of healing and recovery. Similarly, Clifford Vella Galea recognised within the model elements that mirrored his own personal journey of recovery and renewal.

The community's emphasis on rebuilding identity, restoring dignity, and creating opportunities for meaningful participation challenged many conventional assumptions regarding rehabilitation.





## Responsibility as the Foundation for Change

Throughout the visit, residents and community leaders repeatedly referred to responsibility as the cornerstone of recovery.

Participants learned that San Patrignano deliberately distinguishes between guilt and responsibility. While guilt often reinforces shame and exclusion, responsibility empowers individuals to recognise their circumstances and actively participate in shaping their future.

Residents are encouraged to take ownership of their actions, contribute to community life, and support one another through the recovery process.

This approach left a profound impression on delegates. Andrew Mallia observed how responsibility is linked directly to restoring dignity and self-worth, while Martin Vella reflected on the importance of creating opportunities for second chances rather than defining individuals by their past mistakes.

The message emerging from these observations was clear: meaningful change becomes possible when individuals are trusted, challenged, and supported simultaneously.

## Learn – Earn – Return

Perhaps the philosophy most frequently discussed during the visit was San Patrignano's principle of "Learn – Earn – Return."

Residents first learn new skills, attitudes, and behaviours. Through commitment and participation they earn confidence, trust, and responsibility. Ultimately, they are encouraged to return value to society by contributing positively to their communities.

Lianne Cassar identified this philosophy as one of the most powerful lessons emerging from the visit. She noted that the concept extends beyond rehabilitation and offers valuable insights into leadership, lifelong learning, and community development.

The principle reinforces the belief that personal growth should ultimately benefit not only the individual but also society as a whole.



## The Transformative Power of Meaningful Work

One of the most striking aspects of San Patrignano is the integration of vocational training within everyday life.

Residents participate in a wide range of productive sectors including agriculture, dairy production, food manufacturing, animal care, hospitality, textiles, leather craftsmanship, construction, and winemaking.

Participants observed that work is not treated as an ancillary activity but as a central component of rehabilitation. Through meaningful work, residents acquire practical skills, develop discipline, rebuild confidence, and regain a sense of purpose.

Graziella Gellel highlighted the impressive range of educational and vocational opportunities available to residents. Paul Farrugia was particularly struck by the scale of the operations and the community's capacity to remain largely self-sufficient. Several participants noted that the quality of products and services produced by residents demonstrated that rehabilitation and excellence can coexist.

The experience reinforced the importance of employability and practical skills as fundamental elements of successful reintegration.



## Community as a Therapeutic Environment

San Patrignano functions as a therapeutic community in which recovery is embedded within daily interactions rather than confined to clinical settings. Residents live, work, learn, and grow together. They are expected to contribute actively to community life while supporting one another throughout the recovery journey.

Crystal Degabriele observed the remarkable honesty and accountability demonstrated by residents, while Glauber Spiteri was deeply moved by the mutual respect and encouragement visible throughout the community.

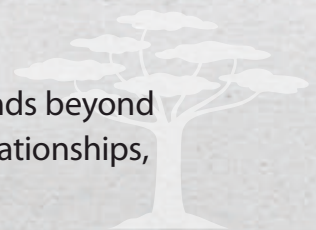
Participants repeatedly referred to the strong sense of belonging that characterises life within San Patrignano. The community model demonstrates that recovery is not solely an individual process but one that depends heavily on relationships, trust, and social support.

## Human Stories Behind the Model

While the structures and systems of San Patrignano are impressive, the personal stories shared by residents provided the most powerful moments of the visit. Delegates listened to accounts of addiction, trauma, family breakdown, social isolation, and despair. Yet these stories were ultimately stories of resilience, determination, and hope.

Grace reflected on the testimony of a woman who, after many years struggling with addiction, succeeded in rebuilding her life through the support of the community. Other participants spoke about the emotional impact of hearing residents describe how they had rediscovered purpose, restored family relationships, and regained confidence in themselves.

These testimonies reinforced an important lesson: recovery extends beyond substance abstinence. It involves rebuilding identity, restoring relationships, and finding meaning once again.





## Lessons for Malta

The study visit generated important reflections regarding social inclusion, rehabilitation, and community resilience within Malta and Gozo.

Participants consistently identified several principles that may be relevant for future discussions.



First, recovery is strengthened when individuals are supported by strong communities.



Second, meaningful work and vocational training contribute significantly to self-esteem, responsibility, and reintegration.



Third, long-term support structures are essential. Sustainable change rarely occurs through short-term interventions alone.



Fourth, collaboration between local authorities, social services, law enforcement agencies, educational institutions, and voluntary organisations is fundamental.



Finally, prevention, inclusion, and early intervention remain critical components of any strategy seeking to address social exclusion and vulnerability.

## Implications for Local Government

Although San Patrignano operates within a unique context, the visit encouraged reflection on the role local government can play in fostering social inclusion and community resilience.

Participants recognised that local councils are often the public institutions closest to residents and therefore well positioned to identify emerging social challenges, encourage community participation, facilitate local partnerships, and support initiatives that promote wellbeing and inclusion.

The experience highlighted the value of continued dialogue between local government, social service providers, community organisations, and other stakeholders regarding how communities can better support vulnerable individuals and strengthen social cohesion.

Rather than offering a direct model to replicate, San Patrignano provides principles that may inform future policy discussions concerning prevention, rehabilitation, social inclusion, employability, and community development.



# Policy Recommendations and Potential Local Government Initiatives

## Introduction

The study visit to San Patrignano highlighted the importance of community, responsibility, meaningful participation, vocational development, and social support in promoting rehabilitation and social reintegration. While the San Patrignano model cannot be directly replicated within Malta, several principles observed during the visit may contribute to ongoing discussions regarding social inclusion, community resilience, and local development.

The following recommendations are intended to stimulate discussion among Local Councils, Regional Councils, government entities, social service providers, educational institutions, and community organisations.



## Recommendation 1

# Strengthening Community-Based Social Inclusion

Participants consistently observed the importance of belonging, participation, and supportive social networks in fostering recovery and personal development.

Local Councils may wish to explore opportunities to strengthen community engagement initiatives that encourage participation among vulnerable residents, including persons experiencing social isolation, unemployment, addiction recovery, or other forms of exclusion.

Possible initiatives may include:

- Community volunteering programmes.
- Intergenerational projects.
- Community support networks.
- Neighbourhood inclusion activities.

## Recommendation 2

# Promoting Skills Development and Lifelong Learning

One of the strongest lessons emerging from the visit was the role of practical skills and vocational development in restoring confidence and preparing individuals for reintegration.

Local Councils may consider strengthening partnerships with educational institutions, Jobsplus, NGOs, and other agencies to support:

- Adult learning opportunities.
- Digital literacy programmes.
- Community-based training initiatives.
- Skills development workshops.



### Recommendation 3

## Supporting Community Participation Through Meaningful Activity

The experience at San Patrignano demonstrated that meaningful participation can contribute significantly to self-esteem and social inclusion.

Local Councils may explore initiatives that encourage active participation in community life through:

- Environmental projects.
- Cultural activities.
- Community events.
- Local heritage initiatives.
- Voluntary service programmes.

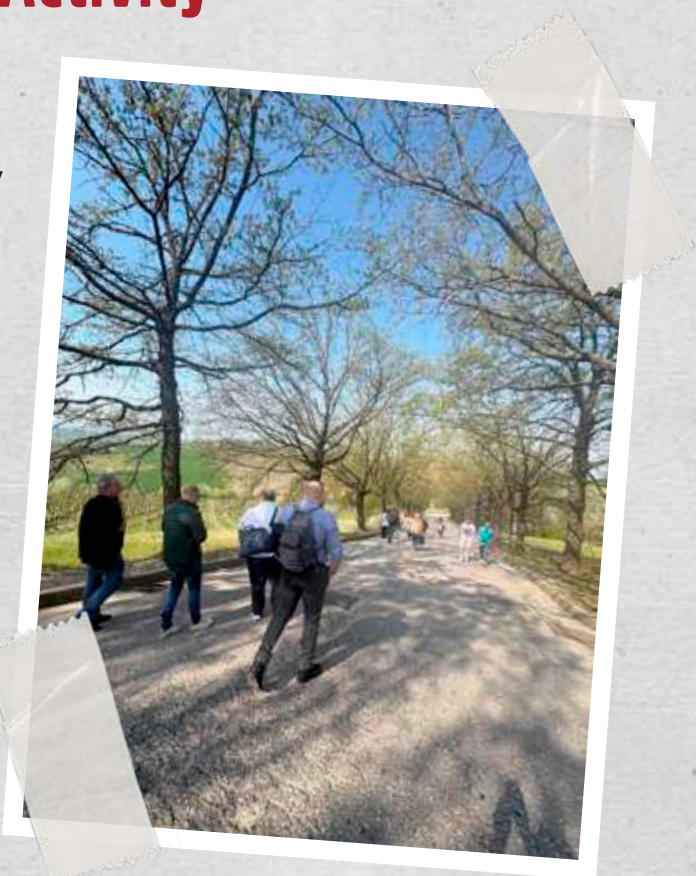
### Recommendation 4

## Enhancing Collaboration Between Stakeholders

Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of cooperation between institutions.

The Local Councils' Association may facilitate dialogue involving:

- Local Councils.
- Regional Councils.
- Foundation for Social Welfare Services.
- Sedqa.



- Caritas Malta.
- Richmond Foundation.
- Malta Police Force.
- Educational institutions.
- Community organisations.

Such cooperation could support more coordinated approaches to prevention, inclusion, and community wellbeing.

## Recommendation 5

# Encouraging Prevention and Early Intervention

The testimonies shared during the visit reinforced the importance of addressing vulnerability before it develops into more serious social challenges.

Local Councils may continue supporting initiatives focused on:

- Youth engagement.
- Mental wellbeing.
- Community awareness.
- Healthy lifestyles.
- Positive citizenship.



## Potential Pilot Initiatives for Further Discussion

The following concepts emerged from reflections held during and after the study visit and may warrant further exploration:

### Community Gardening Projects

Community gardens can provide opportunities for social interaction, environmental awareness, skills development, and intergenerational engagement.

### Local Skills Exchange Programmes

Residents could share practical skills and knowledge through structured community workshops, strengthening social connections while promoting lifelong learning.

### Community Volunteer Networks

Local Councils may facilitate volunteer initiatives that encourage residents to support vulnerable members of their community through practical assistance and social interaction.

### Wellbeing and Inclusion Forums

Periodic local forums bringing together residents, social organisations, service providers, and local leaders to discuss community wellbeing challenges and identify collaborative solutions.

### Youth Community Leadership Programmes

Programmes encouraging young people to participate in civic life, volunteer activities, environmental projects, and community development initiatives.

## Reflection

The principal lesson emerging from San Patrignano is that strong communities contribute significantly to personal growth, resilience, and social inclusion. While Malta's circumstances differ considerably, the principles observed during the study visit provide valuable inspiration for future discussions regarding how local government can continue contributing to healthier, more inclusive, and more resilient communities.

Any future initiatives should be developed through consultation, partnership, and evidence-based practice, taking into consideration the specific realities and needs of Maltese and Gozitan communities.

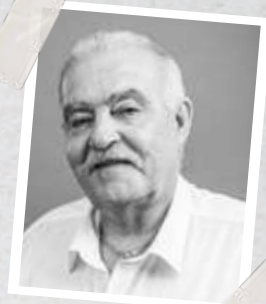


## Participant Testimonials and Reflections

### Paul Farrugia

#### Regional President, Port Regional Council

Paul Farrugia highlighted the scale and complexity of the San Patrignano model, noting the extensive range of productive sectors operating within the community. He was particularly impressed by the self-sufficiency achieved through agriculture, dairy production, bakeries, textiles, leatherwork, and wine production. Paul also reflected on the compassion demonstrated by the residents who guided the delegation throughout the visit, observing the pride they took in sharing their achievements and personal journeys. He concluded that the model demonstrates how rehabilitation can be successfully linked to productivity, responsibility, and community living.



### Anthony Chircop

#### President, Eastern Regional Council

It was clearly evident from our visit that San Patrignano is a self-sustaining therapeutic rehabilitation community that operates on principles very different from those of traditional rehabilitation centres. The concept of "Community as a Method" is particularly impressive. Residents live together in a structured environment, learning self-discipline, responsibility, and trust through work and mutual support. The fact that the programme is entirely free of charge and relies on commercial activities and private donations makes its achievements even more remarkable. Hearing the residents' life-changing stories and their expressions of gratitude towards the community was deeply moving. I sincerely thank the Local Councils' Association, and particularly its President, Mr Mario Fava, for providing us with the opportunity to experience this extraordinary initiative first-hand.



## Clifford Vella Galea

### Regional President, Northern Region Council

For Clifford Vella Galea, the visit was deeply personal. As a former substance user, entering the community reminded him of his own journey of recovery and personal transformation. He reflected on the dignity, discipline, and hope visible throughout the community and observed that residents are not defined by their past mistakes but by their commitment to rebuilding their lives. The experience reinforced his belief that recovery is possible and that with the right environment, support, and guidance, individuals can transform their lives in meaningful ways. He described San Patrignano as a powerful testament to the value of second chances.



## Jesmond Aquilina

### President, Southern Regional Council

My visit to San Patrignano was truly inspiring and enriching. I was deeply impressed by the strong sense of community, discipline, and solidarity that permeates every aspect of the village. The workshops, agricultural activities, and vocational training programmes clearly demonstrate how residents are encouraged to develop practical skills while regaining confidence and self-respect. What touched me most were the personal stories shared by the residents. Listening to their experiences of hardship, addiction, recovery, and hope was both moving and inspirational. The visit reinforced my belief that recovery is not only about overcoming addiction but also about restoring dignity, purpose, and hope. San Patrignano stands as an outstanding example of how a caring and supportive environment can transform lives and help individuals become productive members of society once again.



## Max Zammit

### Mayor, Ta' Xbiex Local Council

Max Zammit described the visit as an inspiring experience that showcased how recovery can be achieved through dignity, responsibility, and opportunity. He was particularly impressed by San Patrignano's unique model, where rehabilitation is supported by meaningful work, education, and a strong sense of community. The experience reinforced the importance of creating value rather than simply providing aid, and highlighted how similar initiatives, adapted to Malta's context, could help individuals rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society as productive citizens. Max concluded that collaboration between local authorities, central government, and NGOs will be essential in creating sustainable, community-based solutions that promote long-term rehabilitation and social inclusion.



## **Lianne Cassar**

### **Executive Secretary, Local Councils' Association**

Lianne Cassar described the study visit as one of the most impactful leadership experiences of her professional career. She reflected on the resilience demonstrated by both individuals and the wider community and highlighted the importance of San Patrignano's philosophy of "Learn – Earn – Return."

According to Lianne, the experience reinforced the value of leadership rooted in responsibility, service, inclusion, and empowerment. She concluded that the visit provided authentic lessons on community-driven leadership and strengthened her commitment to promoting more inclusive and people-centred approaches within institutions.



## **Crystal Degabriele**

### **Executive Secretary, Bormla Local Council**

Crystal Degabriele highlighted the honesty and self-awareness demonstrated by residents, who openly acknowledged mistakes made in the past while showing determination to learn from those experiences. She was particularly impressed by the opportunities available for residents to develop skills, pursue hobbies, and gain practical experience that prepares them for life after rehabilitation. Crystal also reflected on the important role played by families throughout the recovery process, noting that support, patience, and trust from family members are often essential to long-term success. She concluded that the visit demonstrated how meaningful change is possible when individuals are provided with structure, support, guidance, and the right mindset.



## **Denise Farrugia**

### **Community Development Manager, Foundation for Social Welfare Services**

Denise Farrugia approached the experience from the perspectives of community development, social innovation, and adult education. She observed how San Patrignano functions as a collective environment where learning, responsibility, and participation form part of everyday life. Denise reflected on the role communities play in both creating and healing trauma, emphasising that effective community development should focus on creating environments that restore rather than wound. She concluded that wellbeing is not solely about the individual but also about strengthening the collective sense of community and belonging.



## Eugenio Muscat

### Councillor, Ta' Xbiex Local Council

Our visit to San Patrignano was both an important and enriching experience. It gave us hope and demonstrated that there are effective ways to support people struggling with drug addiction and help them rebuild their lives. Perhaps this experience could pave the way for future cooperation and partnerships between organisations in Malta and San Patrignano, enabling more people to benefit from such a successful rehabilitation model. I am grateful for having been given the opportunity to participate in this visit.



## Glauber Spiteri

### Local Councillor, Bormla Local Council

Glauber Spiteri reflected on the emotional impact of hearing residents share their personal experiences and witnessing the pride they take in their achievements. He was particularly struck by the strong sense of community and mutual support evident throughout the programme. Observing the transformation of residents and their renewed ability to express their talents and aspirations inspired him to reflect on the capacity for change and personal growth. He concluded that the experience demonstrated how positive transformation is possible when individuals are supported and encouraged to believe in themselves.



## Grace Marie Zerafa

### Mayor, Mqabba Local Council

Grace identified the personal testimonies shared by residents as one of the most powerful aspects of the visit. She was particularly moved by the story of a young woman who struggled with addiction for thirteen years before joining the rehabilitation programme. Witnessing the transformation in the individual's outlook, confidence, and future aspirations reinforced Grace's belief that recovery is always possible regardless of how long a person has suffered. She highlighted the importance of support systems such as San Patrignano in providing individuals with both a second chance and the practical tools needed to rebuild their lives.



## **Graziella Gellel**

### **Executive Secretary, Senglea Local Council**

Graziella Gellel described the visit as inspiring and eye-opening. She was impressed by the discipline, organisation, and educational opportunities available within the community. Particular attention was given to the diverse sectors operating within San Patrignano, including agriculture, dairy production, textiles, leather craftsmanship, and food production. Graziella highlighted the importance of patience, discipline, and personal responsibility in the rehabilitation process and noted how residents gradually develop the skills and confidence required to rebuild their lives and prepare for the future.



## **Martin Vella**

### **Local Councillor, Bormla Local Council**

Martin Vella described the visit as a meaningful and eye-opening experience that strengthened his understanding of addiction and recovery. He was particularly impressed by the structured nature of the programme and the strong sense of community that exists within San Patrignano. The experience highlighted the importance of compassion, support, and second chances in helping individuals recover and successfully reintegrate into society. Martin concluded that the visit changed his perspective on addiction and reinforced the importance of creating supportive environments that promote personal growth and rehabilitation.



## **Nigel Holland**

### **Mayor, Floriana Local Council**

The visit to San Patrignano was a highly educational experience. While one cannot help but feel sadness when seeing so many young people facing the consequences of addiction, one is equally impressed by the scale of the rehabilitation centre and the comprehensive support offered to its residents. The centre's approach to reintegration through training in agriculture, viticulture, manufacturing, and various crafts instils a sense of responsibility and the dignity of work. The firsthand experience gained by local government representatives undoubtedly enhanced our understanding of rehabilitation models and increased our awareness of both the challenges and opportunities facing those who seek to rebuild their lives after addiction.



## Andrew Mallia

### Local Councillor, Imsida Local Council

Andrew Mallia described San Patrignano as much more than a rehabilitation centre, highlighting how the community restores dignity, responsibility, and purpose to individuals who have lost direction in life. He was particularly impressed by the structured environment, the productive activities undertaken by residents, and the emphasis placed on personal development and social reintegration. He noted that hearing first-hand accounts from young people who had experienced addiction was particularly moving and encouraged reflection on social disconnection, digital dependency, and the weakening of traditional support structures. According to Andrew, the San Patrignano model offers valuable insights for policymakers seeking sustainable and effective approaches to supporting vulnerable individuals and strengthening social resilience.



## Police Sergeant Ruznai Gaffarena

### Drug Squad, Malta Police Force

Police Sergeant Ruznai Gaffarena approached the visit from both a professional and personal perspective. He highlighted the effectiveness of San Patrignano's long-term and community-based approach to rehabilitation and noted the importance of addressing patterns of addiction through structured work, responsibility, and social support.

From a policing perspective, he emphasised the need to balance enforcement with rehabilitation and stressed the importance of collaboration between local councils, social services, law enforcement agencies, and other stakeholders. He concluded that effective rehabilitation is rooted in community and that stronger partnerships can help support both public wellbeing and public safety. This format is much more suitable for inclusion in the final report because it preserves each participant's individual contribution while clearly identifying their role and perspective.



## Conclusion

The study visit to San Patrignano was far more than an educational exercise. It was a powerful demonstration of the resilience of the human spirit and the capacity of communities to transform lives.

The experience showed that rehabilitation is not simply about overcoming addiction. It is about restoring dignity, rebuilding identity, creating opportunities, and strengthening relationships.

For the Local Councils' Association, the visit reaffirmed the importance of investing in people-centred approaches that place responsibility, participation, inclusion, and community at the heart of social development.

The lessons learned from San Patrignano will continue to inform discussions concerning local governance, community wellbeing, social inclusion, and rehabilitation in Malta and Gozo.

Ultimately, the visit delivered a simple yet powerful message: when individuals are given opportunity, support, responsibility, and belief, transformation becomes possible.





SanPatrignano





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