

New online system to streamline access to Masters' Offices

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On 10 October, Justice and Correctional Services Minister Ronald Lamola unveiled an online system aimed at revolutionising deceased estate registrations and offering protection against fraudulent activities. In the era of digitisation, this is a welcomed initiative by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development.



This new online system aims to streamline access to Masters' offices, including the registration of deceased estates. After various pilot programmes earlier this year, the system has been rolled out to the Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, Pretoria and Thohoyandou Masters' offices. It will be gradually rolled out to other parts of the country as well.

What does this mean for the South African public?

No need to drive to and queue at the Masters' offices to lodge a deceased estate. The public will be able to register a deceased estate via the online portal, eliminating the need for physical or in-person visits to a Master's office, except when lodging original wills. There will be an option to book an appointment via the online system for instances that require in-person visits. Furthermore, self-service and staff-assisted kiosks will be established at all Masters' offices to help elderly people who aren't as tech-savvy to report estates online easily.

Could this innovation speed up the estate admin process?

The department notes that online registrations will speed up the registration process and ensure quicker availability of the details/particulars of the beneficiaries and trustees. In theory, this should have a ripple effect and assist with speeding up the overall time taken to settle deceased estates.

Deputy Master of the High Court in Thohoyandou, Ziyanda Nondabula, noted that members of the public will save on travel costs and experience quicker turnaround times that will ensure that an estate is settled within a reasonable time. She said

the move seeks to eradicate long queues and clear the backlog as a result of the lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In an interview on Newzroom Afrika, Adv. Kanyane Mathibe, Master's Office chief director, said the system aims to minimise some of the challenges that the Master's Office and clients have experienced. She added that it will eliminate the queuing that family members must do to report or lodge a deceased estate. Clients will now be able to lodge a deceased estate from the comfort of their homes or from their offices – in the case of legal practitioners or fiduciary professionals who act on behalf of clients. Adv. Mathibe said the system will also eliminate the long turnaround times to obtain a letter of executorship (LOE), or a letter of authority (LOA) in the case where an estate's value is less than R250,000.

She noted that ordinarily, their commitment is a 21-day turnaround time from the time an estate is reported to issuing an LOE and that they found in their trial that in certain instances with the new online system, it could be produced in a much shorter space of time (two days were noted in some of the trial cases).

Adv. Mathibe also encouraged the public to create wills so that there is certainty and clarity when the estate is submitted to the master.

The online process

The new online process to lodge a deceased estate includes creating a profile and receiving login details and a password, then filling in the required fields and uploading supporting documents. These fields include the deceased's details > the applicant's information > next of kin details > assets and liabilities > executor information > supporting documents.

Once completed, the user is issued a unique reference number (URN) which can be used to view the status online.

Trial and an error, or two

As SA's leading provider of [wills and estates](#) and winding up hundreds of estates every month, Capital Legacy has welcomed this innovation and understands what the department is trying to achieve.

We were afforded the opportunity to be part of the trial. The department of Justice and Constitutional Development's representatives explained that the need for the modernisation of the department, the after-effect of Covid-19 on estate backlogs, as well as a cyber-attack they experienced led to the realisation that a new online system was needed.

Some of the participants of the trial did receive their LOE in only a matter of an hour but naturally, it was the 'perfect setting' with IT and Master's representatives on-site to assist with any queries and produce quick feedback.

As part of the trial, we tested two cases on the online portal and were able to identify a few 'bugs' in the system and will continue to actively work with the department wherever it needs us to.

Another positive element of the new system is that LOEs would no longer need to be signed off when using the new online system since it's been replaced by a QR code verification process. For the general public registering a 'simple' estate of a family member should be an easier process, provided the applicant has all the relevant information needed and has good quality documents/legible supporting documents to upload. The need to visit the Master's Office won't be completely eliminated as the original will would still need to be lodged in person, but the fact that that it can now be conducted as a pre-booked appointment does help avoid queuing time etc. (the appointment date and time can be booked online for the in-person meeting).

Capital Legacy's take on the new system

Ryan Thomas, executive manager, estates at Capital Legacy, believes that the system presents a great breakthrough for members of the public that need to register a family member's death and has welcomed the prospective benefit of quicker turnaround time for issuing LOEs and LOAs to the public. Thomas said one would need to be aware that the more complex the estate or the higher the number of beneficiaries, the longer it would take to verify all the documentation. Thomas noted

that the new online process is quite user-friendly (provided you know and understand the required fields), so professionals shouldn't have a problem filling out the details online, however, the public might still need support in understanding exactly what is required.

Thomas explained that [Capital Legacy](#) welcomes this innovation because up to now, we've had to send a Master's correspondent to physically follow up on LOEs.

"Our top priority is protecting and fulfilling our estate promise, which is 'to make the loss of a loved one easier'. For the moment, Capital Legacy will continue business as usual until all snags are ironed out on the online system before we migrate to the Master's new portal, to avoid any potential delays for our clients. This is certainly a great initiative from the department, and we support their journey to improving processes and systems."

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