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**LOSS OF DOCUMENTS IN THE MASTER'S OFFICE**

In an advanced economy proof of ownership of most assets is recorded in a document. The safekeeping of that document is vital to the owner of the asset. For example, title deeds to land are registered in the Deeds Office. Deeds Office records provide proof of ownership. As a precaution against the loss of documents, the Deeds Office microfilms all registered deeds.

Many citizens form a trust to hold assets on behalf of a family. A trust deed is lodged with the Master of the High Court. The trustees appointed in terms of the trust deed may act only when Letters of Authority have been issued by the Master. From time to time amendments are made to the trust deed and changes in trustees are recorded. As the repository of trust instruments, all amending deeds must be filed with the Master. If trust deeds are lost, trustees apply to the Master for certified copies.

Regrettably it has become evident that some of the Master's offices sometimes misplace or lose files with the result that the trust documents are lost. This results in delays and prevents the filing of amendments to Deeds of Trust and the change of trustees. On the death or retirement of a trustee it is often urgent that new trustees be assumed so the trust can continue to function and operate. Requests for the issue of new Letters of Authority can take six or eight months to process while the Master's office looks for the file. The eventual solution is for the trustees to submit certified copies of the existing Trust Deeds and Letters of Authority to the Master and request the Master to open a substitute file in order to issue new Letters of Authority. Were the Master not to do this, trust deeds could not be altered and trustees could not be changed. The consequences could be catastrophic for families whose assets are held by trusts.

Because the Master's offices can no longer be trusted as safe repositories for important documents, trustees and beneficiaries should ensure that certified copies of Deeds of Trust, Amendments of the Deed and Letters of Authority are kept in fireproof safes to be available for production should they be unobtainable from the Master's office.

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