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TURNAROUND

Justice department willing to enter into pact to improve master's office – Lamola

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The justice department is willing to enter into a memorandum of understanding with the legal and accounting fraternity and other stakeholders on the rollout of its plan to improve the services of the master's office, justice minister Ronald Lamola says.

He told a meeting of parliament's justice committee that the memorandum could provide the framework for the collaboration between the department

and stakeholders. Engagements would be held monthly with stakeholders to deal with the challenges faced by the office.

The Law Society of SA (LSSA) has highlighted the disarray in the master's office, which deals with deceased estates and liquidations as well as the administration of the Guardian's Fund.

appointment of curators and registration of trusts.

Lamola said the Special Investigating Unit, which investigated maladministration and

corruption in the office, had submitted its preliminary report. It resulted in the department instituting disciplinary processes against implicated officials.

The committee was addressed by the head of the LSSA's deceased estates, trusts and planning committee, Hus-san Goga, who outlined what it believes should be done in the short term to address the malaise in the office. It includes the immediate use of emails as a medium of correspondence, a

reduction in turnaround times, notification within seven days of outstanding requirements and strict file management to prevent file losses.

During a meeting with the committee in October Goga described the disarray in the master's offices, including a lack of responsiveness, misplaced files and insufficient staff, he said, results in long delays in finalising matters. After the meeting, committee chair Bulelani Magwanishe said an urgent

meeting would be called with the ministry, the acting chief master and the LSSA to discuss the issues raised.

Last week, stakeholders including the LSSA met deputy minister John Jeffery to discuss the problems at the master's office.

The department's deputy director-general, Thabiso Thiti, told MPs that action is being taken to improve the functioning of the master's offices.

He cited problems facing the

offices as long queues, unreliable and slow systems, loss of documents, poor infrastructure at some offices, load-shedding and backlogs.

The modernisation and transformation plan, Thiti said, includes the creation of a contact centre and a complaints management committee for engagement with stakeholders; the roll-out by January 2024 of an online registration system for deceased estates; digitisation of documents; upgrade of the network;

improved infrastructure; maintenance; installation of generators at offices to deal with load-shedding; installation of UPS backup power that would be completed by March 2024; and the filling of vacant posts.

A task team has been established, Thiti said, to monitor implementation of the plan.

While acting chief master Penelope Roberts insisted that the turnaround times for letters of executorship and authority has improved from 21 working

days to 15, deputy chair of LSSA's national deceased estates committee Ceris Field said it is not the reality, as she waited about six months to have letters issued.

Her view was shared by Magwanishe.

"Quite clearly what you are saying is very far from the truth," Magwanishe said.

"Even the 21 days which you want us to believe, we know that it is not true. It takes more than six months."