ACCOUNTING CONSIDERATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT-FUNDED TRUSTS

Purpose:

The purpose of this guidance is to explore accounting-related considerations related to government-funded trusts which are established by the government to fund a specific purpose or activity. This guidance deals specifically with the difference between controlled and non-controlled trusts, the introduction of accountability provisions which can now be reflected in trust agreements, and key timing considerations for trusts contemplated towards year-end. It is important that these factors be taken into account when establishing a trust, in order to achieve the intended fiscal impact and appropriate accountability over the use of public funds.

Introduction:

Trusts are usually established by way of trust declaration or trust agreement, and are one of several means by which the government can direct funding to support key policy initiatives. Simply stated, trustees hold title to property for the benefit of, and stand in a fiduciary relationship to the beneficiaries. Trustees are accountable to third parties (beneficiaries) for the use and disposition of trust assets and for the funds derived from those trust activities. The trust itself is not a separate legal entity. The trustees carry out the activities of the trust in the name of the trustees.

Generally, direct year-end transfers are the preferred alternative over trusts where the province wants to retain ultimate decision-making authority regarding amounts to be transferred to recipients. Direct transfers are more appropriate where the identity of eligible transfer payment recipients is known and the amounts to be transferred to each recipient can be or has been determined.

Year-end transfers to a trust might be considered where the province desires to delegate to third parties ultimate decision-making authority regarding allocation of amounts amongst eligible beneficiaries.

A trust must be valid for legal purposes in order to be recognized for accounting purposes. Key requirements for a trust to be valid include: an intention to create a trust ('certainty of intention'), certainty of subject-matter of the trust ("certainty of subject matter") and the objects of the trust must be certain ('certainty of objects"). There are generally two different types of trust, a trust in which the objects are the "beneficiaries" and trust in which the objects are a "purpose" (e.g. for charitable purposes). Where a trust is under serious consideration, it is imperative that ministries seek legal advice to ensure that the contemplated trust will be valid.

Trustees are obligated to follow the terms of the trust declaration or trust agreement which will usually detail the powers and duties of the trustees including the number of trustees and how decisions will be made by the trustees.

Controlled versus Non-Controlled Government-Funded Trusts

From an accounting perspective, it is important to distinguish whether the design and governance of a particular trust results in the trust being controlled by the Province for accounting purposes. Control stems from the nature of the relationship between the government and the trust. Financial and operating policies are principles that determine how an organization conducts its activities. The ability to govern these policies is an important element of government control.

The means by which a trust is established, the government's representation among the trustees, the government's involvement in the trust's governance processes and ability to impact trustee discretion in decision-making are but some of the factors to be considered in assessing whether a trust is 'controlled' or 'not controlled' by the government.

In establishing a trust, it is important to achieve the intended relationship between the province and the trust in order to achieve the intended fiscal impact.

Non-Controlled Trusts:

Where trusts are not controlled by the Province, they are excluded from the government reporting entity. For non-controlled trusts, the following accounting would apply to trust funding:

- Where funds provided to the "trust" are unconditional, the Province would record a transfer payment expense for any transfers approved in the current period (and flowed by finalization of public accounts).

- Where funds provided to the "trust" are conditional (i.e. upon the trust completing some specific task or result), the Province would initially record funding to the trust as a prepaid expense until the conditions are met at which time the Province would record a transfer payment expense, with the corresponding credit to prepaid expense. This may occur over a number of fiscal years.

In determining whether a trust is controlled, there are a variety of ways that a government might be perceived to be governing the financial and operating policies of a trust. These include:

- Eliminating or significantly limiting the ability of the trustees to make future decisions
- Directing the financial and operating policies of the trust
- Overruling, modifying or vetoing the financial and operating policies established by the trust.

Specific factors that should be considered in establishing a non-controlled trust include:

- Government representation in the trustees (should be in a minority position), and non-government trustees should be nominated by non-government sources
- Government influence over day-to-day trust governance and trustee discretion to make decisions (e.g. selection of eligibility criteria, selection of recipients).
- degree of influence over how funds are disbursed (i.e. the Declaration of Trust can provide general guidelines but not be overly prescriptive)
- the government's power to unilaterally appoint or remove the majority of trustees

- the government’s on-going access to the trust’s assets, or right to direct decisions regarding the flow of those assets to specific beneficiaries
- the government’s unilateral power to dissolve the trust, except under specified circumstances as stipulated by the trust agreement (i.e. corrective action)
- the government’s ability to establish or amend the policies used by the trust to manage accounting, personnel, deployment of resources, etc.

In some cases, it may be advantageous for ministries to provide administrative support to trusts. In these cases it is important that the extent of such support is not so pervasive as to influence or direct the day-to-day financial or operating policies of the trust, otherwise the trust will be deemed controlled and will be subject to consolidation in the government reporting entity.

Controlled Trusts:

If the Province controls the trust (for example, through its power to appoint a majority of the trustees on the board of trustees), the Province would be deemed to have control of the trust, resulting in the trust being accounted for in the same manner as other organizations controlled by the province (i.e. on a consolidated basis). As a result, the Province’s contribution to the trust would not be expensed when it is transferred, but rather over time as the funds are disbursed to trust beneficiaries.

<u>Accountability Related Considerations:</u>

The Auditor General has confirmed that the new accountability provisions developed for one-time transfers can also be applied to trusts without impacting the expense treatment of any transfers to non-controlled trusts.

These new accountability provisions will enable the government and the Legislature to:

- obtain assurance that a trust is spending public funds prudently and for the purposes intended and to take corrective action if it is not;
- ensure ministerial accountability to the Legislative Assembly for the trust’s activities; and
- ensure that the province is able to take corrective action where warranted and as stipulated under terms of the trust agreement.

It should also be noted that the Auditor General’s Act now allows the Province’s Legislative Auditor to conduct special audits of any person or organization receiving transfers from the government, including trusts.

To enhance accountability controls over government transfers to non-controlled trusts, Ministries can consider incorporating some or all of the following accountability provisions as part of their trust agreement/declaration without impacting the accounting treatment of the trust.

The inclusion of any of these provisions should not result in a trust being assessed as ‘controlled’. Note that the key determinant in identifying appropriate provisions for any individual trust is a ministry's assessment of the **risk** associated with a particular trust, as per the Transfer Payment Directive.

1. **Description of intended use of trust funds**;
    - specific purpose(s) for which the funds are to be used;
    - description of intended recipients and related eligibility criteria*; and,
    - the nature of eligible expenditures relevant to the transfers.

    *Note: avoid *overly prescriptive* eligibility criteria which would effectively eliminate or significantly limit the trustees' discretion to make funding decisions.

2. **Requirement for information**
    - o Information to be provided by the trust at a future date (e.g. requirement for trustees to advise the government of trustee-developed performance criteria, and provide annual assessments against those criteria)

3. **Report-back requirement for Public Accountability**
    - o information to be provided by the trust at a future date with respect to the stewardship and payment of transfer funds (e.g. audited financial statements, audited list of recipients and amounts funded).

4. **Right to independent verification/audit**
    - o The Province reserves the right to audit any transfer payment recipients. The trust agreement should make reference to this fact.

5. **Right to take corrective action**
    - o Where stipulated under the trust agreement, the Province reserves the right to re-direct unused funds where results of a trust assessment (where required by the trust agreement) indicate original purpose of the trust is not being achieved, or if there remain unused funds at the end of the trust term.
    - o Province may also reserve the right to extend the term of the trust agreement, where funds remain at the end of the trust period.

To qualify for in-year expense treatment, the non-controlled trusts must satisfy the following:

- the decision to establish the trust must have been approved by Treasury Board/Management Board of Cabinet and ratified by Cabinet by March 31^{st};
- the ministry providing the transfer must have approved appropriations and spending authority by March 31^{st};
- Trustees must have been identified and signed the trust declaration or agreement to establish a valid trust by March 31^{st};
- the trust must be set up and ready to receive funds, and a nominal amount transferred to the trust by March $31^{s;t}$; and,
- the government should have communicated publicly (e.g. in the Budget document) the pending or final establishment of the trust.

In addition, all remaining funds beyond those initially transferred at March 31^{st} should be transferred to the trust by June 30^{th}.

Appendix

Trusts
Questions and Answers

Question: *Where a trust is announced in the Budget document, must the trust be established by March 31st, or could such a trust be established shortly thereafter without impacting the expensing of transfers to the trust in 2007-08?*

Answer: *A trust would have to be established prior to the end of a fiscal period in order to satisfy the recognition criteria for government transfers. If the intended recipient for a government transfer does not exist at March 31st, the province cannot record a payable owing to it under existing accounting standards.*

Question*: Does the transfer of funds to a non-controlled trust need to occur by March 31st or before the date of Public Accounts finalization?*

Answer: *Consistent with the new requirements for one-time transfers, as long as the trust is established by March 31st, the transfer is authorized and a reasonable estimate of the amount can be made, cash payments can be made after year-end.*

Question: *Can beneficiaries of a non-controlled trust include consolidated entities provided that the ultimate selection of recipients is at the discretion of the Trustees?*

Answer: *Any amounts provided to a trust which are in turn be provided to an organization inside the government reporting entity should not be expensed at the time of the transfer to the trust. Any amount that is flowed to a trust with the intention of subsequently flowing the funds to a consolidated entity should not be recorded as an expense to the government.*

Question: *Can a Ministry provide administrative support to a trust without compromising the non-controlled status of the trust?*

Answer: *The government can provide administrative support as long as the extent of government administrative support is <u>not so pervasive</u> so that the government is in substance establishing and managing the trust's policies in the areas of accounting, personnel, compensation, collective bargaining or deployment of resources. Where such administrative support is assessed* *as pervasive, it could impair the trust's non-controlled trust and the trust will be consolidated onto the province's financial statements.*

Can the following clauses appear in a trust agreement for a non-controlled trust to ensure adequate accountability over public funds without impacting the expense treatment of such trusts?

Question*: Specific description of purpose of the trust (possibly including nominal allocation among various objectives)*
Answer: Yes.

Question: *Can the trust agreement include a specific description of the intended groups of beneficiaries and detailed eligibility criteria.*

Answer: *Specificity should be applied cautiously, so as not to limit the discretion of the trustees in their subsequent grant making processes. For the trust to be considered 'not controlled' it should not be seen as 'establishing the trust's fundamental purpose and eliminating or significantly limiting the ability of the trust to make future decisions by predetermining the financial and operating policies of the trust.*

Question: *Can trustees stipulate that funding is to be provided to beneficiaries on a cost-sharing basis?*
Answer: *Yes.*

Question: *Can the trust agreement include a requirement for a trust to report back to the province on trustee-established performance criteria and results, audit of financial statements, audited recipients and amounts, confirmation that trustees communicated to beneficiaries the intended purpose of the funding, etc.*
Answer: *Yes.*

Question*: Requirement for Trust to publicly post communications on existence, availability of funds, eligibility criteria, recipients and amounts granted to each recipient.*
Answer: *Yes*

Question: *Inclusion of a 'suggested' drawdown schedule over a period of years, with discretion left to Trustees as to actual results.*
Answer: *The inclusion of a drawdown schedule is not suggested for one-time, up-front transfers.*

Question: *Trust agreement can suggest accountability provisions which might be attached by Trustees to beneficiary payments (e.g. specific purpose of funding, requirement for report-back, right to audit, corrective actions).*
Answer: *Yes*

Question: *Trust agreement to reserve the province's right to re-direct any unspent funds to specified parties (e.g. non-consolidated entities or another non-controlled trust) at the end of the trust term, or alternatively to extend the term of the trust where unspent funds remain.*

Answer: *Yes*

Question*: Can the trust agreement include the requirement for evaluations of the trust at certain times (e.g. years 3, 7, 10 of the trust agreement), with the right for the government to decide either to terminate the trust (corrective action) based on the results of the assessment, or extend the trust beyond the initial term as per the agreement.*
Answer: *Yes.*

Question: *Trust agreement can require Trustees to request as part of the funding process that beneficiaries acknowledge receipt of government funding in their public communications on specific projects.*
Answer: *Yes.*