

JOINT NEWS RELEASE – PSNI AND LEGAL SERVICES COMMISSION

FOR RELEASE – TUESDAY 24 APRIL 2007

The Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Legal Services Commission joined forces today as part of an initiative to prevent and detect applicant fraud in the legal aid system.

Around £69 million was paid out in legal aid in Northern Ireland last year. The level of fraudulent claims is necessarily difficult to quantify. However, in 2005/06 the Commission made savings of approximately half a million pounds as a direct result of its counter fraud work.

The Commission and PSNI Fraud Squad hosted an awareness seminar at the Police College in east Belfast today to highlight the legal powers which are available to police officers to tackle the problem.

A fraud hotline has also been set up by the Commission (0800 328 7360) so that any member of the public, who has knowledge of a fraudulent application for legal aid by an individual, can provide information which will be treated in confidence.

The Chief Executive of the NI Legal Services Commission, Gerry Crossan said: “The Commission takes a hard line on fraud and we are committed to referring all such cases to the PSNI for prosecution. The Commission aims to provide high quality customer focussed services that target those in greatest need, promote social inclusion and demonstrate value for money. Any attempted or actual fraud by applicants affects the Commission’s ability to fund important services to the people of Northern Ireland.”

Head of PSNI Economic Crime Bureau, Detective Superintendent Roy McComb, said: “Police are committed to working with the Legal Services Commission to identify and prosecute legal aid applicant fraudsters. A raft of legislation is in place and we intend to use it, both at headquarters level through the Fraud Squad and at local District level right across Northern Ireland.

“Today’s event is about making sure our officers know how to use these laws so that those applicants who are defrauding the legal aid system, and ultimately defrauding the taxpayer, will be brought before the courts. We intend to make sure there is no hiding place for anyone who is claiming assistance to which they are not entitled.”

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Notes to editors: If you would like to speak to a representative of LSC or PSNI, please contact Ken Devlin at PSNI Press Office on 9056 1544 or mobile 07801 738688. Or Linda Carmichael at the LSC on 9040 8866.