

Solicitors warned over 'McMafia cash' in property deals

Martin Bentham Home Affairs Editor

SOLICITORS were today warned to be suspicious of house-buyers paying with large sums of unexplained wealth as law enforcers began a campaign to stop dirty money flowing into the capital.

The National Crime Agency and the Solicitors Regulation Authority, which are working together, said legal professionals were an "obvious target" for organised criminals wanting to launder cash.

Unveiling the new Flag It Up campaign today, the SRA's Juliet Oliver said solicitors should be "extra vigilant".

"For example, if someone is buying a house at a high price, but does not seem to have an obvious source for the money. Each firm should have a way of assessing risk, and be clear when they will not accept work because the risks are too high," she said.

"If solicitors are complacent, they could ultimately be helping to enable serious crime, such as human trafficking, drug offences and even terrorism. Individuals who are involved run the risk of both police action and disciplinary processes." She said solicitors should recognise that their obligations

went "well beyond the needs of their client". She added: "They must consider the wider public interest and are legally required to take action where they suspect someone is trying to break the law, or risk involvement with the activities of serious criminals."

Sanctions could also be imposed on solicitors who set up companies or trusts – both often used to carry out the purchase of expensive property – without carrying out adequate checks on their clients or raising the alarm when suspicions emerge.

The campaign, which begins with an advert in today's Standard, has been prompted by concern about the way in which London's property market is being used to launder criminal profits.

The issue has been highlighted in court courses, as well as by the NCA and the anti-corruption campaign group Transparency International.

The journalist Misha Glenny, whose book *McMafia* inspired the current BBC crime drama, said at the weekend that he believes London has become a "centre of laundering filthy lucre" and that successive governments had fallen "desperately short" in their efforts to address the problem.