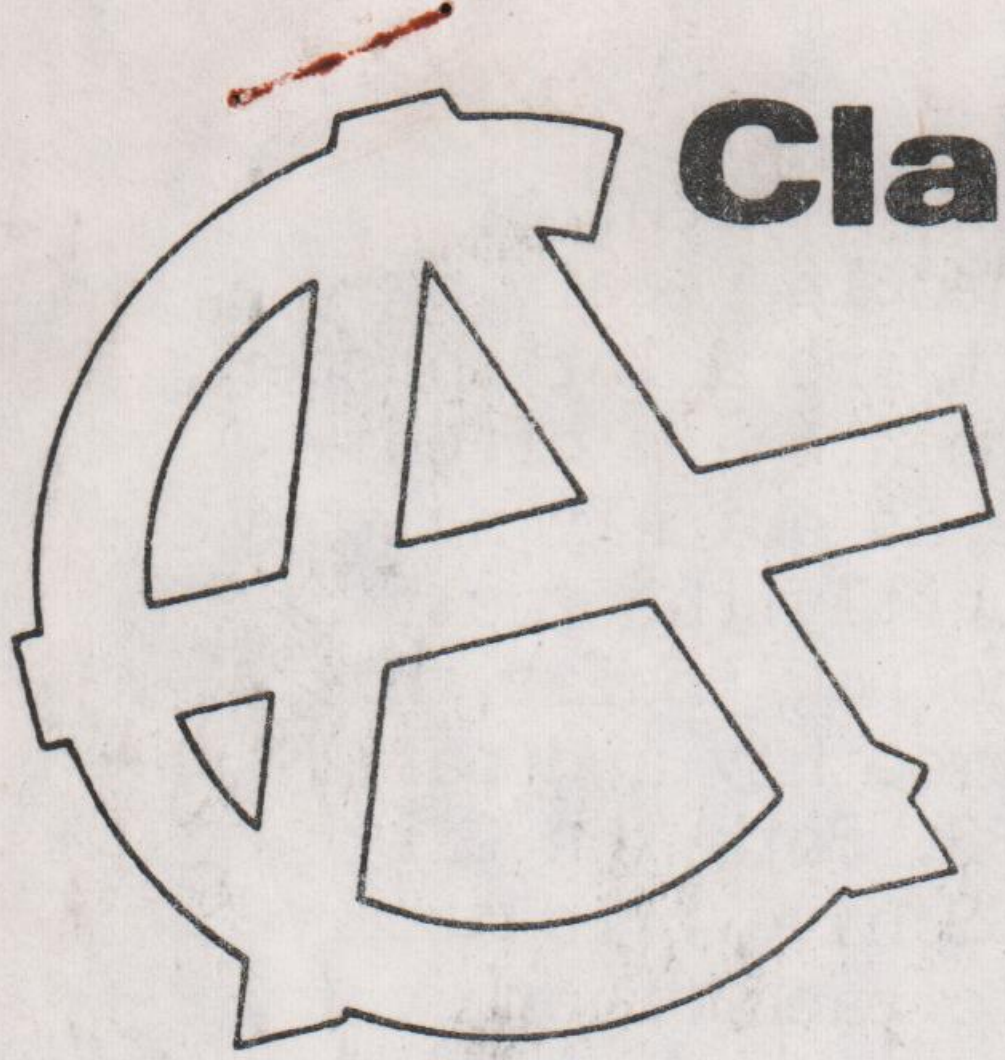


Claimants' Action Nottingham

c/o International Community Centre
61b Mansfield Road, Nottingham.



FREE-Take One

Claimants Suffer-Whose Fault?

As anybody who has claimed Supplementary Benefit since April 1983 will know, getting your rent paid by the council (the so-called Housing Benefit) is a very complicated business. Having signed on for the first time, you should soon be sent a yellow form (form A367) by the DHSS, asking for details of your accommodation. Once this has been completed and returned to the council at the Guildhall, you should by law have to wait only 14 days before you receive your first rent cheque.

The date, April 1983, is important because this was when responsibility for the payment of rent was moved from the DHSS, who pay Supplementary Benefit, to the Local Council. This change was made by the government in order to make rent payments to claimants simpler and more efficient. However, it was such a hurried and poorly planned move that problems have occurred ever since. By far the biggest of these problems is the time it takes for rent payments to be made. A survey done by Claimants' Action Nottm. in February 1984 found that, of 70 people questioned who had claimed after April 1983, none had received payment within the promised 14 days. But the following extract from the 'Evening Post' of November 23, 1983, is an example of the City Council misrepresenting the situation:

"Housing Benefit payments for tenants who qualify under DHSS rules to have their rent paid are coming through in about four weeks for the private sector and two weeks for council houses, says the city treasurer, Mr Sydney Stares."

Mr Stares, as City Treasurer, is responsible for all city council finances, including Housing Benefit. He never denies his responsibility but often claims that, as the head of a large department, he doesn't know every detail of what is being done in his name.

This certainly surprised Claimants' Action because it was a blatant admission that they were failing to meet the 14-day payment deadline. More to the point, though, we have evidence to show that many people were still experiencing delays of up to 3 months. Even today, more than a year after the changeover was completed, people are still being made to wait months for their rent payments.

A claimant who has to pay £15 per week in rent (a fair average for Nottingham), if made to wait 3 months, would have to find £180 out of his or her dole money. An average weekly benefit payment for a single person is £25 per week - so after rent, only £10 would be left to pay for a week's food, heating, clothing, etc.

In an attempt to dig deeper, Claimants' Action pursued the matter with a series of letters to Mr Stares. The replies were inadequate and led us to arrange a meeting, with the help of some city councillors, to face Mr Stares personally.

Also present at the meeting, on 25 April, 1984, were Labour city councillors Nigel Lee, Lee Harrison and Tony Morris. The councillors were sympathetic to our case but we are still waiting for them to act.

Several Housing Benefit problems were discussed but the meeting concentrated on the delays. Mr Stares made the following claims:

- In all but a few cases payments were being made within 14 days of the council receiving all the necessary information about the claim (which we'd heard before).
- The remaining problems were caused either by the DHSS failing to tell the council that someone had signed on and wanted to claim rent, or by the claimant failing to correctly fill in the yellow form (A367) about their accommodation. The point about the DHSS is particularly interesting because, on the same day, representatives of Claimants' Action also met with the DHSS, who told us that they usually informed the council about new claimants within 3 days of receiving the claimant's completed purple B1 form.
- And in addition to these further inadequate reassurances, Mr Stares said that if any delays did cause hardship, claimants could claim an Interim Payment and that many hundreds of such payments had already been made.

An interim payment is made to claimants who are facing hardship due to a delay in their rent payment of over 14 days. See further on for details.

In our survey, only one out of 70 people received an interim payment and that was only by threatening to remain in the Housing Benefit office all night if necessary. We believe that this help is deliberately not advertised to prevent too many people asking for it. The procedure for demanding an interim payment is included in this leaflet. If you would like some help in claiming one, we will be happy to accompany you to the City Treasury or to give you further advice on how to go about it.

Although delays in the payment of Housing Benefit to people receiving Supplementary Benefit are a lot shorter than a year ago, payments are often still not being made as quickly as they should be. This is partly the fault of the City Treasury who now insist that things are running smoothly and partly the fault of the DHSS. Both the City Treasury and the DHSS have tried to foist the blame on to each other, yet neither has made a serious attempt to solve the problems faced by the claimants. In this situation, the City Treasury's Housing Benefit department is ultimately responsible for protecting claimants from delays and suffering.

At present, claimants are the ones being made to carry the can. This will continue unnoticed if it is allowed to, therefore we should press as many officials and representatives as possible to highlight and, hopefully, to stop it.

Write to Mr Stares at the City Treasury; write to your MP and city councillor; even write to the 'Evening Post' to put them in the picture as to what is really happening. Mr Stares also said in the 'Evening Post':

" If somebody is in this desperate position we are here to satisfy people's requirements. We can move quickly in this department."

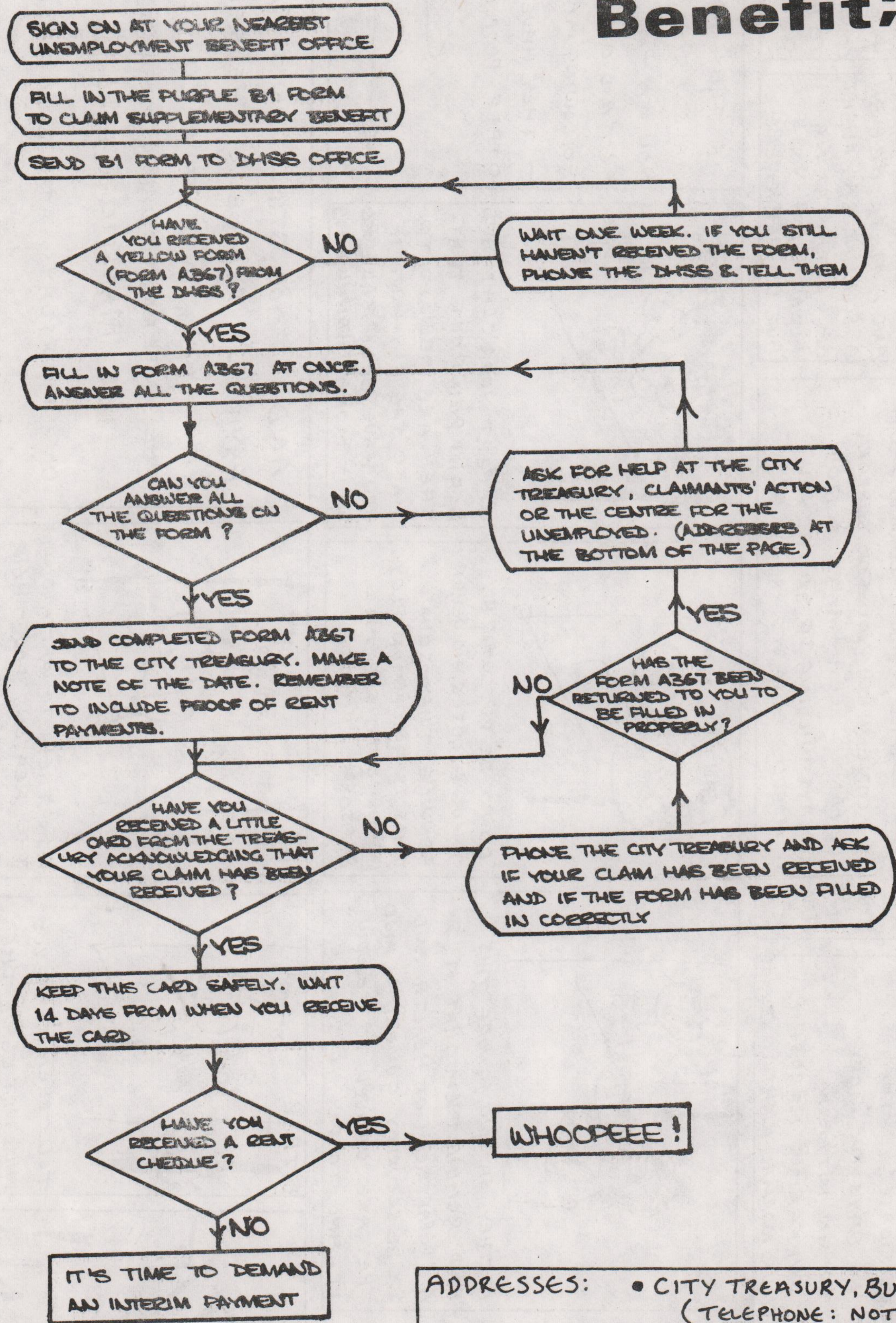
Well, this is his claim, but it is far from accurate at present: we should take this as an invitation to push to make it come true.

Claimants' Action are presently compiling the next issue of 'Downers' which will be devoted to the problems resulting from the overpayment of Housing Benefit. This has been a particular problem in Nottingham because the council have been unlawfully withholding benefit from people who have been overpaid through no fault of their own. We would be very interested to hear of any experiences or problems that people have been having. You can contact us at: Claimants' Action Nottingham
c/o International Community Centre
61b Mansfield Road
Nottingham

If you have an immediate problem on overpayment that needs sorting out, phone Mark on Nottm. 413121.

Work through the diagram from the top, by following the arrows.

Claiming rent on Supplementary Benefit;



- ADDRESSES:
- CITY TREASURY, BURTON ST. NOTTM. (TELEPHONE: NOTTM. 418571)
 - CLAIMANTS' ACTION
c/o INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CENTRE
618 MANSFIELD ROAD, NOTTM.
 - NOTTINGHAM CENTRE FOR THE UNEMPLOYED,
66-72 HOUNDSSATE, NOTTM.

GETTING AN INTERIM PAYMENT

AN INTERIM PAYMENT IS ONLY POSSIBLE 14 DAYS AFTER THE COUNCIL HAS RECEIVED YOUR ACCOMMODATION INFORMATION. SO CHECK WITH THE HOUSING BENEFIT DEPARTMENT (BY PHONE OR VISIT) WHEN THEY RECEIVED YOUR 'A367' AND YOUR 'CERTIFICATE'. IF THEY HAVE HAD THEM FOR 14 DAYS OR MORE YOU ARE ENTITLED TO AN INTERIM PAYMENT TO AVOID SUFFERING HARDSHIP. THIS WILL NOT EFFECT YOUR NORMAL RIGHT TO CLAIM



YOU WILL HAVE TO VISIT THE TREASURY AT THE GUILDHALL, OPEN 10-00AM TO 4-00PM. TAKE SOMEONE WITH YOU FOR SUPPORT AND COMPANY - CLAIMANTS ACTION ARE ALWAYS WILLING TO GO IF YOU KNOW NOBODY ELSE TO ASK.



IT MAY BE A LONG WAIT SO A BOOK, A SNACK AND A FLASK, OR EVEN A SLEEPING BAG MIGHT BE WORTH TAKING ALONG WITH YOU! BUT DO PERSEVERE.



AT LAST! IT'S YOUR TURN DONT BE PUT OFF BY THE PERSON ON THE COUNTER. THEY ARE PAID TO HELP YOU - REMIND THEM THIS IF NECESSARY



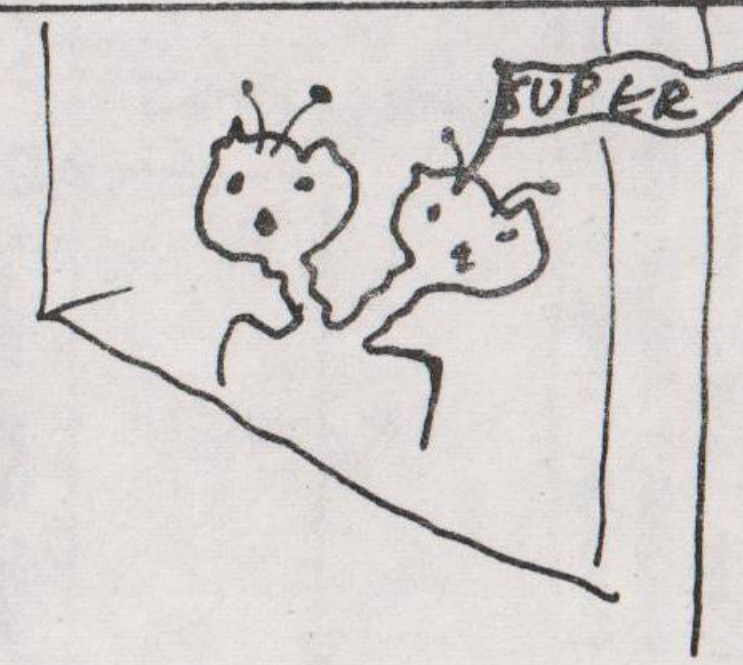
TELL THEM HOW LONG YOU'VE BEEN WAITING AND ASK FOR YOUR INTERIM PAYMENT.



IF THEY SAY NO, IGNORE THIS AND REMIND THEM THAT IT IS A "DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECURITY" GUIDELINE AND THEY ARE OBLIGED TO FOLLOW IT, AND TO PAY YOU.



DON'T BE PUT OFF BY THEIR EXCUSES, HOWEVER GENUINE THEY SOUND. THIS IS A COMMON PLOY. DEMAND TO SEE THE PERSONS SUPERIOR.



REPEAT YOUR CLAIM AND AGAIN POINT OUT THAT THEY ARE OBLIGED TO MAKE THE PAYMENT IF YOU HAVE BEEN MADE TO WAIT MORE THAN 14 DAYS

IF THEY STILL REFUSE OR MAKE EXCUSES OR EVEN ASK YOU TO TRY ANOTHER DAY TO GET RID OF YOU - ONE OF THE FOLLOWING MAY BE SUCCESSFUL - THEY HAVE BEEN FOR OTHER PEOPLE IN THE PAST,

DRASTIC ACTION!
BLAM



TELL THEM THAT YOU WILL NOT LEAVE THE OFFICES UNTIL YOU ARE GIVEN YOUR MONEY - HOWEVER LONG IT TAKES



ASK THEM TO WRITE DOWN THE REASONS FOR THEIR REFUSAL, AND TO THEN SIGN IT...

AND, IF YOU STILL DON'T RECEIVE A PAYMENT, REMEMBER THE REASONS THEY GAVE YOU AND COME TO SEE US AT THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CENTRE 61B MANSFIELD ROAD ON THURSDAYS AT 2.00 PM ONWARDS AND WE WILL TRY TO HELP.