

# A meeting with the Housing Minister

**M**yself and Brian Shakespeare attended an event in Oxford with the Housing Minister, Alok Sharma. This was one of a dozen events around the country where the Minister is attending meetings involving council and housing association tenants. In his introductory remarks he explained that Teresa May had told him when she gave him the job, that she wanted him to go round the country listening to social housing tenants and the issues they raised. So here he was.

The format of the meeting was somewhat limiting. After his initial comments the tenants had round-table discussions, where people raised the issues they considered of importance, broken down into three themes, which were handed back to the organisers. The “summation” of the discussion was not done by the tenants but by an official of the Department of Communities and Local Government from a cursory reading of the slips handed in by the group facilitators!

There was an open session at the end though this was only about 25 minutes long, where people could question or direct comments at the Minister, who responded in brief. According to him this process was preparatory to the Housing Green Paper they are going to produce, and he promised that the points that tenants had raised would be fed into the discussion on the content of the Green Paper.

The Minister flitted about from one table to another having a brief listen to the discussion. When he arrived at my table I raised the issue of the starvation of local authority housing revenue accounts (HRAs) and the need to '[reopen the debt settlement](#)'<sup>1</sup> of 2012. His response was something along the following lines. "I have been discussing the question of finance with the CEOs and directors of council housing departments in the meeting before this one. I'll address the funding issue at the end. I'm more interested to hear about what you think about the service you receive and how it can be improved." It would seem that complicated questions of finance should be left to Directors and the Minister.

In the final session Brian Shakespeare managed to speak. He raised the question of Universal Credit and its impact on tenants. He explained to the Minister that in the case of Swindon half of the rent arrears, some £600,000 was owed by people on Universal Credit. Wouldn't it make sense, he suggested, to continue the payment of Housing Benefit/Local Housing Allowance, whilst the UC claim is being processed, rather than driving people into debt? This was a good question, though sadly one which the Minister failed to answer.

Insofar as he did answer the questions and comments raised in the final brief session Mr Sharma's line was broadly that the government was already acting to deal with the housing crisis. He mentioned the £2 billion extra for 'social housing' (actually for "affordable housing") and the proposed return in 2020 to the rent formula of CPI+1% for 5 years. According to him this would help councils and housing associations both to maintain their existing stock and build new stock. Apparently this has been 'universally welcomed'. Obviously tenants will be over the moon at the privilege of five years of above inflation rent increases, especially when rents have increased at double the rate of earnings over the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://keepourcouncilhomes.wordpress.com/2017/10/20/under-funding-of-council-housing-time-to-reopen-the-council-housing-debt-settlement/>

past ten years.

Mr Sharma said not one word about the funding crisis of local authority housing revenue accounts nor of grant for building new council homes.

There was a kind of suppressed anger amongst tenants about the impact of the welfare reforms, in particular universal credit and the bedroom tax. (Tenants can be too polite in these formal settings.) Mr Sharma failed to answer one tenant who pressed him on his voting record on welfare cuts. Housing association tenants complained that they are not replacing the homes they are selling off with social housing. There was also a common complaint about consultation which was more formal than real.

Feedback from the pre-meeting the Minister had with the housing associations and councils suggested that his main emphasis was on 'tenant engagement' so there was little wider discussion on finance and strategy. The reason for his interest was, I was told, the "sensitivities following Grenfell". He was mainly interested in the degree to which social landlords were listening to their tenants, what opportunities they had to have their say and improve the services. Of course, even if social landlords listen to their tenants if they haven't got the funding to maintain and improve their housing stock then 'tenant engagement' is not worth a great deal.

It remains to be seen what is in the Green Paper. However, the fact that Mr Sharma has promoted this exercise is an indication of the pressure the government is under. The withdrawal of the proposal to extend the Local Housing Allowance to 'supported housing' and social housing in general should give heart to tenants and housing campaigners to step up the pressure on a weak government which could yet disintegrate. The fundamental problem in relation to council housing remains the shortage of funding for HRAs. They have insufficient funds to maintain and renew their homes over the long term. Without that then the condition of the housing stock is liable to deteriorate rather than improve.

The CEO of the housing association SOHA, which organised the meeting, profusely thanked Mr Sharma for participating in this and the other events. This was apparently a first for a Housing Minister. However, if the Minister really wants to hear what tenants have to say then there should be an open discussion on existing government policy, tenants' criticism of it, and what policy tenants think needs implementing. Instead of which the Minister was attempting to determine the focus of the discussion rather than giving tenants free reign to express their views. It would have been more useful to have a longer open session where tenants could discuss questions of policy with the Minister.

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