

Smith Square Debates Spring Season 2012

Purpose of Report

To advise the Leadership Board of the upcoming Smith Square Debates, their title, content and proposed panellists. At the time of writing, invitations were being prepared to be sent to the relevant audience as per our events database, including MPs, Peers, Council Leaders, Chief Executives, relevant academics, think tanks, private sector trade associations, third sector bodies, parliamentary research staff and select committee staff.

Summary

This report outlines the proposed programme of the four Spring 2012 Smith Square Debates.

Recommendation

That the Leadership Board note the content of the report and provide any comments that they feel may improve the events, and, where possible, attend the events that are most relevant to them.

Action

Officers to action in accordance with Members' discussions.

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Smith Square Debates

Background

1. The Smith Square debates have been running for several years now as a bi-annual series of three or four debates. Originally the LGA held one debate for each of the Boards but now they are focused on the key issues for the sector, on areas where we want to be seen to be at the forefront of the debate. The debates have grown in popularity and success. Originally attracting primarily a local government officer based audience we now regularly draw audience members from key stakeholders (including think tanks, charities and the private sector), parliamentarians and their advisors, LGA members and senior offices and journalists.
2. The last series of debates covered the riots, public health, local economies and housing. We felt the last series of debates were particularly worthwhile for the standard of panel members, the quality of attendees and the lively debates which took place. The debates normally take place on a Wednesday from 6pm. They have run before as follows – the chair introduces the panel members, each panel member has 3 minutes to outline their views on the topic, and the debate is then opened up to the floor for around 45 minutes to an hour depending on the level of discussion. The debate is followed by drinks. They provide not only a forum for debate and an opportunity for us to promote the LGA as leading the debate on a particular area but also for us and our members to build relationships with our key stakeholders.

Spring Season 2012

Debate 1: Local Government's Magna Carta?

29 February

3. This Smith Square debate will form part of a wider constitutional reform event series (in conjunction with Political and Constitutional Reform Committee), Independent Local Government, which will be launched in February.
4. Who is ultimately responsible for what when it comes to funding and deciding how to provide local public services? Taxpayers are disadvantaged and confused by a lack of clarity, with nothing that stipulates exactly what the relationship is between central and local government.

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5. Is a code needed to form the basis of local government's relationship with central Government and is this the best tool for ensuring financial autonomy and operational independence from central Government? The debate will focus on whether such a code would allow local authorities to clearly demonstrate that they are responding to the needs and wants of their local communities, rather than acting on central government prescriptions; and will explore whether such an agreement could be effective in promoting a greater sense of engagement within local areas.

Debate 2: Social care in 2012 is an embarrassment; can we salvage anything from the current system?

14 March

6. We all know the social care system needs urgent reform, but with previous attempts failing, we are now in last chance saloon. With the very real prospect that the system will break under the strain, this debate will look at what needs to happen now to make the system fit for purpose. With local government left to juggle budget cuts and an ever increasing list of responsibilities who picks up the pieces if the system fails? Should we privatise the system or truly localise to ensure future generations get the best possible care and support?
7. This debate will coincide with the launch of the LGA's publication on care and support, which will outline how we think the system could be reformed.

Debate 3: Planning reform – help or hindrance?

21 March

8. Planning has been in the news like never before. There has been significant debate around the Coalition's attempt to improve the planning system by stripping away the reams of complex and sometimes contradictory national policy to focus on key principles enshrined in just over 50 pages within the NPPF, which is for sign off by Government any day now.
9. Is the NPPF the miracle solution to the problems plaguing the planning regime? Many queries and concerns certainly remain about its practical implementation and whether it will indeed be a help or a hindrance. How far will the NPPF improve the current planning system? Has it created as many problems as solutions? And has it failed to address some key barriers facing both industry and councils?
10. This will be an opportunity for panellists and attendees to engage in discussion around their concerns and ongoing barriers to an effective planning regime, including wider subjects such as high street regeneration, local growth, and correcting the use class system.

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Debate 4: Public service reform: 'Is Whitehall's 19th Century model of funding public services fit for the 21st Century?'

28 March

11. Councils have already found savings of 28 per cent and are being asked to find more. Whilst local authorities develop innovative models of delivering public services, Whitehall continues to create blockages that prevents a truly localist method of delivery. As strong leaders and innovators, responsible for stimulating the local economy, the debate about how we drive changes and navigate tough times will be vital for the future of the sector.
12. We will be asking whether the dominant Whitehall machine is fit for purpose in a reformed public service landscape, and if local authorities operate effectively within the existing structures. Or can departmental structures, quangos and the apparatus of departmental accountability meet the challenge of providing modern, targeted twenty first century public services?