

BUILDING THE FUTURE

Insider reports from the Leaders Dinner, where Dave Whelan made a heartfelt appeal to support the region's youth



Retail tycoon and Wigan Athletic chairman Dave Whelan put himself at the heart of the government's Big Society project at *Insider's* Leaders Dinner this year by calling on the region's businesses to back lads and girls clubs in locations around the region. In his wide-ranging and often hilarious speech at the Lowry Hotel, he said Wigan Lads Club saved his life as a young rogue in the post-war years and that many young people need that same direction now. "We have to invest to get the best out of our youth. People say they're not the same as we were, but they are and they need a place to go to inspire them."

Whelan's after-dinner speech to 200 business leaders touched on his life as a professional footballer, as a child in wartime Wigan and in his early years in business, including a story of how he

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Dave Whelan

sold his Whelan's supermarket to Ken Morrison for £1.5m. He also spoke about how he fought Boots Chemists in court over his licence to sell medicines on his market stall in Wigan in the 1960s.

His heartfelt plea to match the £3m

he has raised for a Wigan club also included a pledge of support from the coalition government. He revealed he will meet David Cameron to make arrangements for the prime minister to make good his pledge to provide some funding, but also open the Wigan club.

The first successful project of its kind in the region is the Bolton Lads and Girls Club (BLGC), which Whelan has been impressed with. The OnSide charity is backing efforts by entrepreneurs including William Lees-Jones, of William Lees Brewery, who is spearheading the development of a super youth club in Oldham, named Mahdlo by the youngsters who have had a say in its design. He hopes the fundraising will also raise the charity's profile.

Whelan said: "OnSide's vision of five youth zones in five years is well on track, and in Oldham we are looking forward to the centre opening towards the end of 2011. The support so far has been fantastic and, as people learn more about what the charity is trying to achieve, they agree this is the way forward in terms of youth provision. Everyone who hears about OnSide or comes to see BLGC, wants to get involved, and that's great for us."



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