

27th June 2012

ResPublica launches 'The Hidden Wealth of Communities: Tackling the civic deficit through social clubs and leisure groups'

On 27th June 2012, think tank ResPublica launched a new report entitled 'The Hidden Wealth of Communities: Tackling the civic deficit through social clubs and leisure groups'. Supported by The Bingo Association, the report explores the value of membership and leisure activities in modern society in the context of a parallel decline in traditional models of association and levels of trust in society. It identifies how 'club-type activities' of various natures contribute to social and public good.

The report, launched in a packed out room in Westminster, was introduced by ResPublica's Philip Blond and later summarised by co-author Keith Cooper, who cited bingo clubs as a key example of large, commercial organisations that are used as social and community venues with far more value to their communities than just offering games of bingo.

Communities and Local Government Minister Andrew Stunell MP addressed the launch event, commenting that you cannot build communities from the top down. He referred to the Government's Localism Bill and the current drive across Government to take power away from Whitehall, and place it in the hands of communities. He linked the "refreshing" Respublica report to the Big Society and referred to bingo clubs as an example of organisations that communities can have to be successful social entities. It was later argued, however, that while communities should build themselves, Government does have a role to play in providing the right regulatory landscape for this to happen. In bingo's case, this meant having a sensible tax regime that allowed the industry to grow and support communities.

Caroline MacFarland from ResPublica also spoke and said the report aimed to articulate the Big Society idea on a practical level, explaining what it can mean on a day-to-day basis. Given that the majority of activities that contribute to a successful society are not captured in a formal sense, she agreed with the Minister that they cannot be created by top down engineering. She discussed how clubs provide members with a sense of purpose, which in turn inspires civic activity – and stressed the importance of creating the necessary conditions to enable this.

Kevin Hamilton, speaking on behalf of The Bingo Association, and Tim Lamb of the Sports and Recreation Alliance each discussed the benefits that bingo and sports clubs respectively bring to communities. They went on to highlight the tax-related issues placed on the two industries by Government, calling for these to be dealt with. Both industries highlighted the need for Government to take action to support them, rather than simply put the onus on them to flourish no matter what the regulatory landscape they inherit.

David Halpern, of the Behavioural Insight Team at 10 Downing Street, addressed the room next and suggested that, in creating communities, everything comes down to whether one feels other people can be trusted; as this affects health, crime levels, methods of governance, and growth rates. He talked about the well-being agenda, and how the Prime Minister is trying to crystalise the value of trusting. He said that although not all social interaction looks the same, it is based on an ability to choose when, where and with whom one interacts, and it is important to create opportunities for this. Thus far, the Government has failed to adequately create these opportunities, and he recognised that it needs to do more to enable citizens to interact. He stressed that it is local Government, not central Government, that needs to create these opportunities. Importantly, he mentioned that he wanted to look specifically at bingo in due course now that he was aware of the issues in more detail.

Speaking last, Martin Blackwell of the Association of Town Centre Management discussed the Mary Portas review, which also referenced the value of bingo clubs, and claimed that her message is now more about communities than just high streets. He considered the money that is provided to communities with no instructions as to how best to spend it, and suggested that this money should go towards putting clubs together. He endorsed the funding of activities by those who want there to be more of them; however, he also stressed the importance of 'time-backing', whereby people offer their time to ensure that activities actually happen.

The value of bingo clubs was recognised by all attending, with some audience members even asking where the nearest bingo club was.

The full report is available to Association Members - please login and go to Resources to download in Members' Resources.