

ADEPT's AGM conference was a great success this year with over 50 policy makers, elected Councillors and key members of the Voluntary and Statutory sectors participating in a lively and well-considered debate.

Taking into account the many recent initiatives, legislative changes and policies, the theme of the debate was **'Empowerment, Spin or Substance?'**

Two distinguished guests kicked off the debate, and generated a range of interventions.

Joy Warmington Chief Executive Officer b:RAP:

Joy Warmington is the Chief Executive of BRAP, a strategic equality development agency, based in Birmingham.

Speaking at our AGM conference, Ms Warmington told the assembled delegates that the government's proposals were too focused on spending decisions and the delivery of public services, and fall short of giving people real power.

"I believe that empowerment is about more than local management or "participatory budgeting. In my view it should have a fundamentally political purpose too – it should genuinely enable people to take greater control of their own lives and be more able to challenge and change those things that shape their lives. I'm not sure that this is what I see as yet in the Government's new agenda. The current proposals began well but don't go far enough."

She went on to say that the proposals in the communities white paper (link to <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/communityempowerment/communitiesincontrol/>) encouraged 'participation' rather than 'empowerment', and this raised a host of issues.

"For BME communities, the issue of representation follows on from participation as inseparably as the cart follows the horse," she explained. "The notion is rooted in the view that BME communities are so different that some kind of 'conduit', some kind of representative, is needed through which an understanding of that community can flow."

This inevitably leads to problems as individuals are then required to speak for a whole community of people, regardless of whether they have the knowledge or capability to do so."

[To read Joy's speech in full click here.](#)

**John Grayson (AdEd Knowledge Company
Sheffield Hallam University)**

Empowerment, Spin or Substance? Contradictions and Possibilities.

John introduced his speech by considering the use of language. He highlighted how when the Labour government was elected in 1997 it introduced a whole new dictionary of political language, based on the notion of the 'Third Way'.

The idea of politics being in part composed of language, is at the heart of understanding aspects of current social policies.

The meanings of terms like 'community', 'involvement', 'consultation', 'engagement', 'empowerment', and 'regeneration' and 'renewal' are 'contested' or 'slippery'.

They are typical of a discourse where people may be using the same words, but speaking different languages.

He went on to say that he believes that radical or popular community development is, at core, part of a process of 'changing the world', and entails working with people in ways that demonstrates that collectively we are not powerless.

He emphasised this by quoting independent research that shows clearly that for all the money, voluntary time and effort expended over the last 10 years in 'regeneration' and renewal areas, 'involvement' and 'engagement' in terms of the number of community groups, tenants groups and federations, has actually declined.

[To read John's speech in full click here.](#)

A number of key messages emerged from the conference which ADEPT and its Board will consider how best to pursue:-

- Need communities to capture a vision of what they want to ensure their own and real empowerment.
- Concept of power should be more openly discussed and acknowledged.
- Power is not something that is 'given', it has to be 'taken' – why would those with power, voluntarily give it away? Power struggles come on many different levels.
- The rise of the BNP poses a real threat to the cohesion of local communities, and the creation of alliances between the trades union movement and wider communities would

- We should not be afraid to facilitate genuine debate around matters impacting on people's lives including perceptions and reality of issues around race, gender, faith, sexual orientation and class.
- Localised activity demonstrates most effectively impact on the lives of those living within a neighbourhood, and can encourage greater participation.
- The role of elected Councillors and their relationship with community activist needs to be treated with care – there are Councillors who perceive such activists as a threat.
- The empowerment of local communities has been reduced to economic outputs, with the greatest value being placed on those in paid work.
- Individuals have a personal choice as to whether they participate or not.
- Wrong to 'lump' the voluntary and community sectors into one sector – the voluntary sector varies so much in size and can be a 'professional' and competitive as the public sector.
- Inadequate understanding of the time and resources required to truly ensure the empowerment of people.
- Looking back and learning the value and lessons from previous practice is not conducted anywhere nearly enough.
- Previously successful activities and campaigns have been successful because of support from both bottom up and top down.
- Truly empowered and successful community activism needs a mix of those from, community organisations, trades unions, with a mix of skills, knowledge and professions.
- Consultation as a tool is over-used, and as such has lost its credibility.
- While money is important in supporting the development of the community and voluntary sectors, there is too much of a rush to adhere to agendas because of the 'mistiness' of created by the promise of money!