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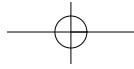
The government’s welfare reforms are a recipe for prejudice and resentment, believes Julia Unwin. The chief executive of the York-based Joseph Rowntree Foundation tells **Ciara Leeming** why its combination of research and housing provision can help tackle the poverty she says is growing

Julia Unwin started out running homeless shelters in the seventies and she fears Britain – and the north in particular – may be slipping back towards those dark times.

“I’m really worried,” she says. “There are some elements of welfare reform and the housing benefit cuts which I fear take us back to the very bad days when the state made huge interventions into how people lived.

“Back in the 1970s the old Department of Social Security would give different rates of social benefit depending on whether you were cohabiting or single. We now have a housing benefit system which is going to be prying into people’s lives to see if they have a spare room or not. I find that really disturbing.”

The closure of women’s refuges, advice centres and




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youth services are all of concern, as is spiralling unemployment across the generations. Equally worrying is the impact of all this instability on families and communities.

"We know some of the changes that are going on set poor people against the very poor," she says. "The reason the government feel confident about their welfare reforms is that they know people on low incomes resent people on very low incomes and on benefits. That is very dangerous – it will foster prejudice and division."

Unwin has been chief executive of the York-based Joseph Rowntree Foundation for five years. The historic organisation is several things rolled into one – a housing provider, a major funder of social policy research and – hopefully – a driver of change at both a governmental and

grassroots level. Although concerned with fighting poverty and inequality across the UK, it retains a particular focus on Yorkshire and the north. These are also the regions Unwin – the highest ranking woman in our 50 Most Influential Northerners 2011 – believes will get a raw deal as savage austerity cuts kick in over the coming months and years.

"We feel there is a real danger of the north missing out in this current crisis. We know that parts of the region were stripped of employment in the past and have carried on being pockets of desperate poverty, crime and drug use. I worry about what will happen to these areas.

"Only recently I was in Bradford, giving out awards to people who are putting mattresses down on floors for homeless people to sleep on. I spent my early life doing exactly that but thought we'd moved way beyond it. It feels like we are going backwards."

Unwin's own family hails from the North East but she has lived all over England. She spent a decade doing community work in Liverpool before living in London for 25 years, where she worked for the old Greater London Council and for voluntary organisations. She has worked for Women's Aid and as a consultant and researcher; along the way she also served as a charity commissioner for five years and spent 10 years on the board of the Housing Corporation.

The JRF chief executive's post seemed a rare chance to combine her experience with her interest in research. She has consolidated the relationship between its disparate parts – namely the housing trust and the research foundation, both of which Unwin heads. JRF spends around £10.5 million a year on research, working hard to make sure its findings are seen by decision-makers.

"If you've got a housing association that is providing real practical services and building housing, and is also commissioning really important research, it seems to me that the two together are bigger than the sum of their parts," she says. "This organisation has always had a big impact, but we've tried to make this even bigger. We base everything on evidence, from the services we run and from the research we commission, and our aim is to make real and lasting change. We are not an airy-fairy think-tank.

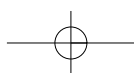
"If I go and talk to ministers about a piece of research we've done, they can find it very interesting. If I go and talk about a piece of research we've done, and our experience of running services, that's a really powerful combination."

Long before Unwin arrived, JRF conducted a major

Unwin, the highest ranking woman in our 50 Most Influential Northerners 2011, warns that poor people must be treated with dignity.

Photo: Kippa Matthews

"We feel there is a real danger of the north missing out in this current crisis."



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Minimum Income Standards research programme has been used to inform living wage calculations, as well as helping grant-giving charities to assess need when calculating payments. It has also been used as a basis for analysing income tax threshold changes.

Its Older People's Inquiry Into That Bit Of Help has played a role in getting central and local government to recognise the importance of small but important improvements to the way help is given to older people living in their own homes.

"If we think we can snap back to where we were before 2008 we are mistaken."

study looking at how homes could be made suitable for people throughout their lives. Its housing arm then built the properties, which worked just as well for the disabled and the elderly as for young families. UK building regulations now require all new housing to be built to this standard.

It has built retirement villages in Hartlepool and York, and runs sheltered housing across Yorkshire. Most of its regular social housing is in York. The trust is now in the process of building a 540-home development, Derwenthorpe, to the east of its home city. The properties, which will be partly for sale and partly for rent, are all being built to a very high standard of energy efficiency.

"We could have done just the research," says Unwin. "But we want to demonstrate that there is a way to build houses that are cheap to heat, cheap to live in and which don't damage the planet."

JRF is just as open when its projects work less well. When an eco-homes development known as Elm Tree Mews disappointed a few years ago, the organisation published a report on its performance and the required improvements – to the great interest of other housebuilders.

JRF's research priorities, as well as poverty, are how Britain will adapt to an ageing society and how to create sustainable neighbourhoods.

The foundation is also tracking the impact of local authority cuts on the poorest in society.

Unwin says: "I believe that through this big period of national austerity, we will hear a huge amount of complaining from the better off, because we are all tightening our belts. But we intend to help people hear the voices of those who are hardest hit."

While there is little doubt that the outlook is grim, Unwin hopes this period could herald some positive changes. To treat our current predicament as a temporary blip would be a mistake: it should instead be recognised as a chance to move towards a better way of living.

"If we think we can snap back to where we were before 2008 then we are making a mistake," she warns. "We would be creating an environment which is not sustainable or safe and is certainly not going to be just for poorer people."

"JRF really wants to focus on how we cope through the period of austerity, how we care for poorer people while that is happening, and how we create a new economy after austerity."

"Yes, we want to highlight the things which are unjust, but we also want to look to the future to ask what sort of labour market do we need to stop people falling into catastrophic levels of poverty."

The future Unwin fears is a labour market with lots of poorly paid, dead-end jobs, and a lot of well-paid jobs, with few ladders in between. She wants an economy where people can progress, which is flexible enough to allow workers to care for children and older people, while offering a reasonable standard of living. Jobs should be secure and offer a routine and regular income.

"I'm not really interested in being told that the chief

JOSEPH ROWNTREE

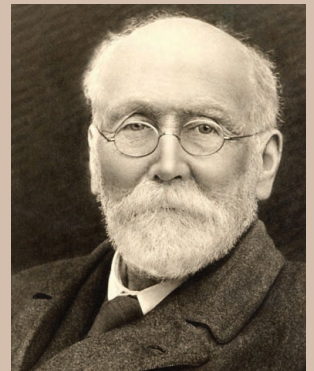
The son of a Quaker grocer, the philanthropist Joseph Rowntree was born in York in 1834 and joined the family business in his early teens.

In 1869 he joined his brother's confectionery business and by the turn of the century – having taken it over following Henry's death – he had expanded it from 30 to 4,000 workers.

Rowntree was a reformer who wanted his money to tackle the root causes of social problems rather than their symptoms.

He opened a library in the factory and offered free education for his employees aged under 17. Staff were offered free medical and dental care and he set up a pension scheme for his workers.

In 1904 he created two trusts to drive social reform – the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, and the Joseph Rowntree Social Services Trust (now the Reform Trust). A third, the Joseph Rowntree Village Trust, was set up to build and manage a 123-acre garden village for low income families at New Earswick, York. This has since become JRF. Rowntree died in 1925. The Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust was established in 1968.



executive of Tesco started off shelf-stacking, because those are the freaks," she says.

"I think we need to make sure we are treating poorer people with dignity and respect and we have to recognise that being poor doesn't mean you are a failure – it simply means you are not very well paid."

"We also need a benefits system where we collectively share our risk. We all face the risk of suddenly getting ill, suddenly getting divorced, suddenly losing our job. The risk that poorer people face is that if these happen it can be catastrophic, with no way back."

I certainly don't think people who are poor should be threatened with destitution as a way of driving their behaviour – in any case, all the evidence says this doesn't work."

The benefits system needs an overhaul but not now, and not in this way. Unwin believes the existing system has made it difficult and risky for long-term unemployed people to get into work and hard for employers to attract people into jobs. But to change it at a time when there are 2.5 million people unemployed is very risky, she says.

"What's different now from where we were in the 1970s is that this time we know we can provide a safety net, and we know it doesn't have to cost a fortune," she adds.

"What we need though is some drive and urgency to tackle the many problems we are facing because where we are headed is disastrous. JRF will certainly continue to shine a bright light on what's going wrong and what can be done to improve it." ■