

National Forum for Neuroscience and Special Education (NFNSE)

Founders: Professor Barry Carpenter CBE, Professor Francesca Happé and Dr Rona Tutt OBE

Patron: Dame Professor Uta Frith

“Education is concerned with enhancing learning and neuroscience is concerned with understanding the mechanisms of learning. It seems only logical that the one should inform the other.” - Dame Professor Uta Frith, Patron of the National Forum for Neuroscience and Special Education, (2011).

Who are the NFNSE?

The National Forum for Neuroscience and Special Education (NFNSE) was founded in 2011 by Professor Barry Carpenter CBE, Professor Francesca Happé and Dr Rona Tutt OBE (a past president of NAHT). It emerged from discussions about how to facilitate closer working relationships between neuroscientists and those working with children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

As Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience in London, Francesca was keen for stronger links with teachers, while Barry and Rona, having spent their working lives in special education, were equally keen to bring together those who understand how children learn with those who teach them.

The aims of the NFNSE are to:

- provide a platform for neuroscientists and teachers in special education to engage in dialogue,
- encourage discourse around the changing pattern of childhood disability,
- share insights from both fields which lead to innovative practice and improved learning outcomes for children.

A Brief History of the NFNSE

The NFNSE was launched officially at an Inaugural Conference in London, held on 10th February 2012, under the auspices of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). Over 100 people attended, including Paul Williams, chair of NAHT’s SEND Council and Sion Humphreys, Specialist Adviser at NAHT. Between then and its move in 2014 to the NAHT’s website, an Annual Conference was held each spring and a seminar in each of the other two terms.

Since 2014, the NFNSE has been hosted on the NAHT’s website, since then the aim has been to include neuroscience as a theme running through the Association’s

programme of events. This includes more general educational courses, conferences and seminars, as well as events geared specifically to those involved in special education across mainstream and special schools. In particular, neuroscience and its links with education has become a feature of the Annual Special Schools, Specialist and Alternative Provision Conference which is held in March.

In 2015, when the Autism and Girls forum established by nasen to look at raising the profile of girls on the autism spectrum, was looking for a home, it was agreed that it would sit comfortably under the umbrella of NFNSE on NAHT's website. Kim Johnson, National President (2016-2017), who has a background in special education, lent his support to the forums, saying they would be high profile during his presidential year.

Future plans

During 2016/17, further developments are planned to bring the work of neuroscientists and teachers closer together, including:

- taking forward the outcomes of the Girls on the Autism Spectrum - the 'Big Shout' conference,
- encouraging more researchers in the field to link with schools and more teachers to have an opportunity to work with scientists,
- providing briefing papers of current research to keep teachers abreast of developments in the field,
- linking with other individuals and organisations with similar aims.

Advisory Panel Members

The NFNSE is supported by an advisory panel.

Dr Michael Brown (Scotland)
Professor Tony Charman
Dr Barry Coughlan (Ireland)
Professor Usha Goswami
Baroness Sheila Hollins
Dr Paul Hutchins (Australia)
Professor Amanda Kirby (Wales)
Dr Hilary Leever
Lorraine Petersen
Professor Richard Rose
Dame Philippa Russell
Dame Dela Smith
Jane Thistlethwaite (New Zealand)
Sue Williamson

Strategic Planning Group Members

The day to day running of the NFNSE is in the hands of a Strategic Planning Group.

Dr Rona Tutt OBE (chair)
Professor Barry Carpenter CBE
Professor Francesca Happe
Colm Davis
Heather Davies
Sarah Hannafin
Kim Johnson (NAHT National President)
Marijka Miles
Kate Quigley
Julie Collick (facilitator)

“We don't need to be good guessers any more. We need dialogue. It's phenomenal what we can learn. Now, many neuroscientists are looking for a placement in schools. Enquiry needs to be at the basis of professional learning. Find out, create, innovate – that's what we need teachers equipped to do. Emotional well-being will become a vibrant part of schools.” – Professor Barry Carpenter (2014)

“Every type of school is finding that they are dealing with a much more complex population, which is why, more than ever, we need to know how neuroscientists are illuminating the process of learning and can assist our understanding, so that we can use those findings to enhance our teaching and our pupils' learning.” – Dr Rona Tutt OBE (2012)