



# Paralympic Personal Bests Winchester 2024 REPORT



**PARALYMPIC  
PERSONAL BESTS**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Paralympic Personal Bests (Para PB) brings together people with learning and physical disabilities with a day full of sport and encourages ongoing participation in physical activity on a regular basis. Winchester City Council, University of Winchester, Everyone Active and Winchester Go LD have worked in partnership as the Event Management Team (EMT) to deliver this special event.

The EMT recognise that regular physical activity is essential for good mental and physical health; it also provides social connections, community engagement, confidence and the development of skills. These are all areas where people with learning disabilities are known to face barriers and inequalities.

The EMT are delighted by another successful Para PB event and are blown away by the enthusiasm, commitment and courage of participants, volunteers and coaches. There is a determination to harness this positive energy and direct it into developing the event even further.

### Looking Ahead

The EMT are keen to think beyond the Winchester Para PB and to use the event's success to help more people with learning disabilities access regular physical activity.

#### Key areas identified for development:

1. Improve the experience for current athletes (especially those diagnosed with autism).
2. Expand our reach to ensure the event is accessible in different regions.
3. Ensure there is a legacy through the uptake of regular physical activity locally.
4. Involve participants in the development and delivery of Para PB event(s).
5. Education and training opportunities for support providers, instructors and volunteers around autism and learning disabilities.

Over the last 13 years the Para PB has demonstrated its ability to grow, evolve and develop. There are new opportunities ahead and the future is exciting.

***Event Management Team (January 2025)***

## FEEDBACK

The Para PB strives to be a positive, inspiring and fun day. A day of enthusiasm and effort, where taking part in sport is championed and participants are celebrated for their individual skills. It is also a day where the community comes together, demonstrating the power of inclusion.



The event's main stakeholders (participants, support staff, volunteers, coaches, EMT, Simplyhealth and Autism Hampshire) were consulted before and after the event. Their comments and suggestions provide the EMT with an opportunity to discuss and shape ideas for future Para PB event improvement.

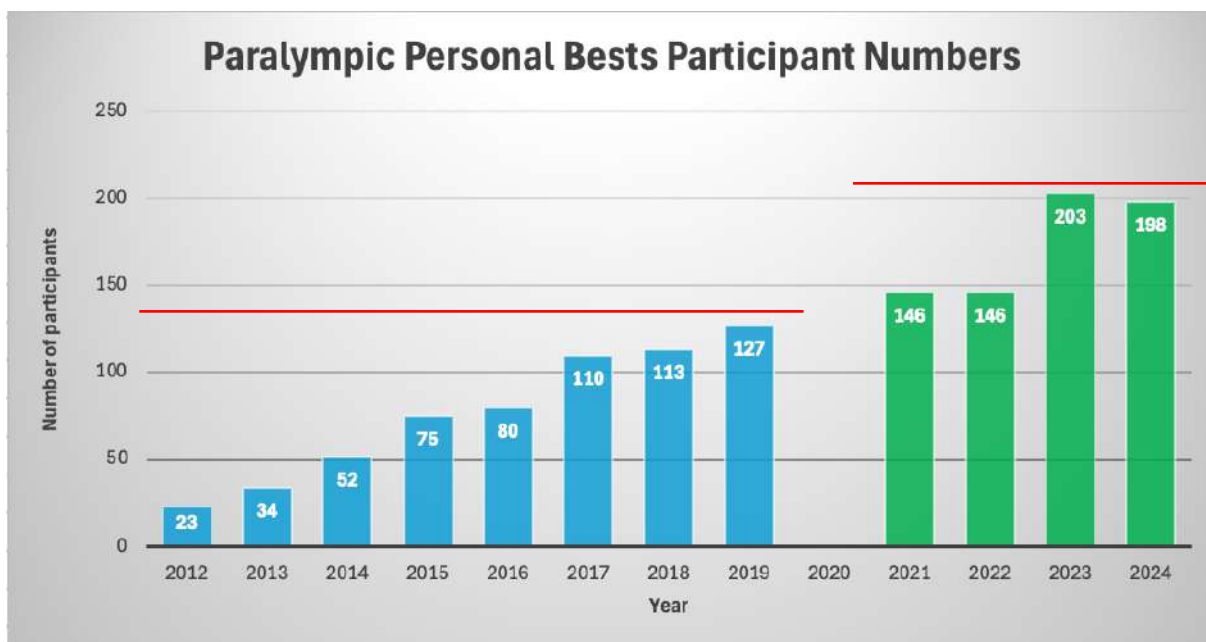
Ideas and feedback were gathered in several ways: via face-to-face meetings, video calls, phone calls, focus groups and email. An easy read feedback sheet was shared with day services prior to their feedback meeting, giving participants an opportunity to think about specific parts of their Para PB experience.


Here are the key suggestions for 2025 event development:

-  Communication and online resources  
(email, website and social media).
-  Registration (develop an online option)
-  Participant Involvement (include LD volunteers)
-  Pre-event information  
(‘What it’s like’ video and country allocation in advance)
-  On the day (meet and greet from minibuses)
-  Medals and awards  
(include a video to congratulate participants)

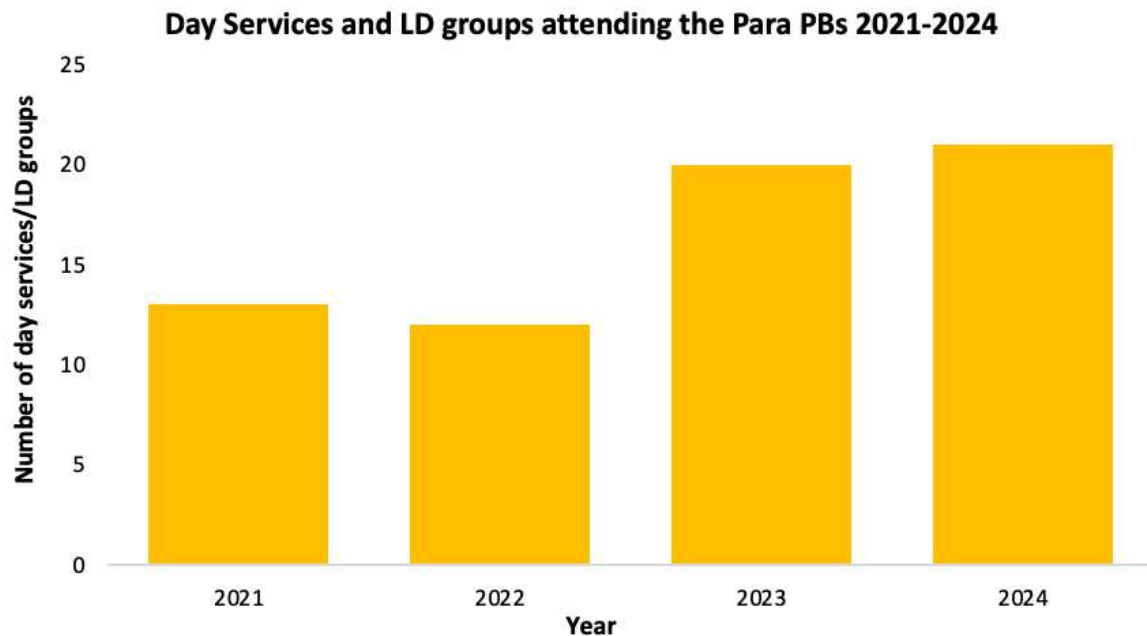
## EVENT SIZE AND SCOPE

Each year the Para PB event gets bigger and better. The target of 200 participants was reached in 2023 and matched in 2024.



-  Venue: River Park Leisure Centre (2012 – 2019)
-  Venue: Winchester Sport and Leisure Park and University of Winchester Athletics (2021-2024)
-  Event Capacity

Good news spreads and the event's reach has grown significantly over the last few years, both in terms of participant numbers and the network of learning disability groups attending. In 2024 participants from 21 different learning disability groups from across Hampshire attended. The majority of groups come back year after year. 16 new groups have been introduced since 2021.



Winchester Para PB has reached capacity for participant numbers. It is not intended for this event to grow beyond 200-210 participants. Factors considered in setting the event capacity include participant number, number of support staff, volunteer number, toilet facilities, Quiet Space facilities for both the indoor and outdoor elements of the event. As a hybrid (indoor and outdoor) event the combined outdoor facilities from University of Winchester and indoor facilities of Winchester Sport and Leisure Park (Everyone Active) are used to deliver the day's programme.

The EMT have successfully worked on contingency planning, to enable smooth last-minute changes to the event delivery. Contingencies were required in 2023 and 2024.

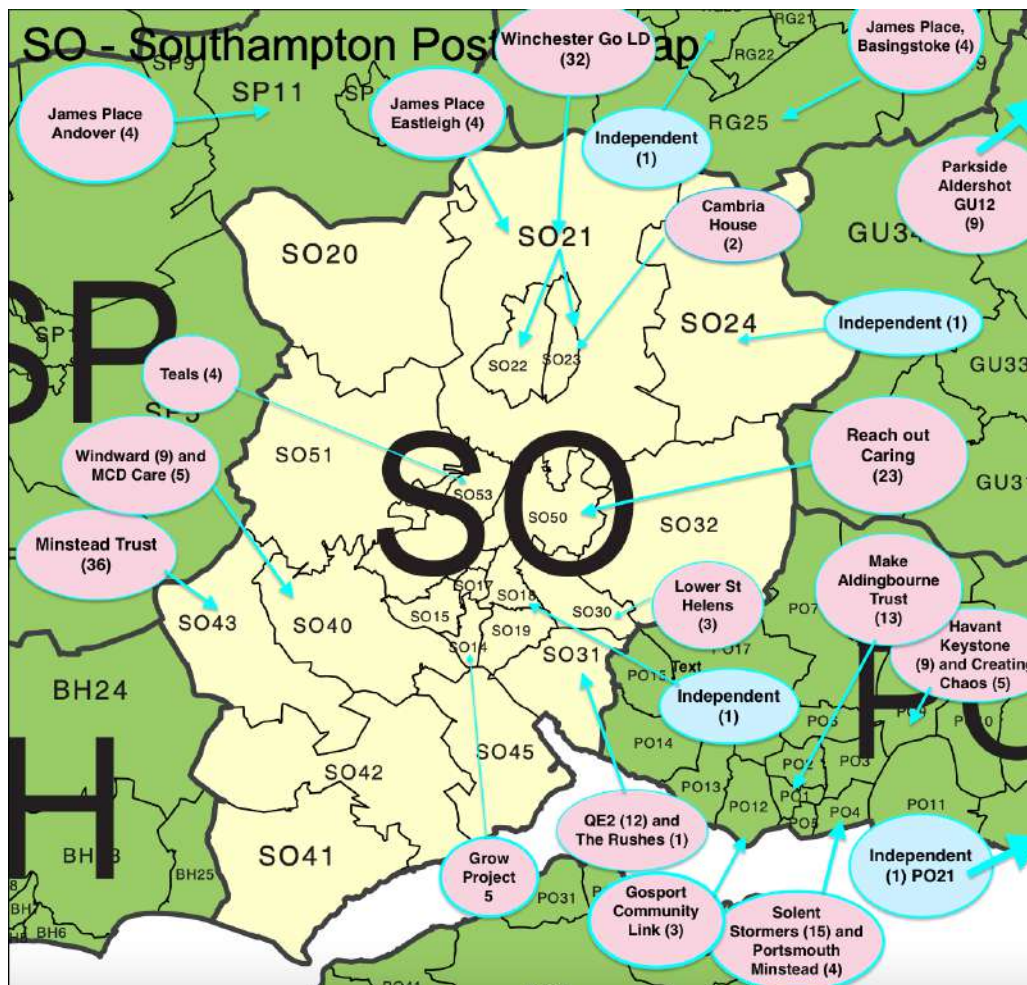
- 2023 – the event was run exclusively outdoors (due to fire alarm)
- 2024 – the event was run exclusively indoors (due to wet weather)

## Geographical spread (day services/LD organisations)

Groups travel up to 30 miles from across Hampshire to attend the event.

Group (number of participants)	Post Code
Grow Project (5)	SO14
James Place Eastleigh (4)	SO21
Cambria House (2)	SO23
Winchester Go LD (32)	SO23, SO22, SO21
Lower St Helens (3)	SO30
QE2 (12)	SO31
The Rushes (1)	SO31
MCD Care (5)	SO40
Windward (9)	SO40
Minstead Trust (36)	SO43
Reach out Caring (23)	SO50
Teals (4)	SO53

Group (number of participants)	Post Code
Make Aldingbourne Trust (13)	PO1
Solent Stormers (15)	PO4
Portsmouth Minstead (4)	PO4
Havant Keystone (6)	PO9
Creating Chaos (5)	PO9
Gosport Community Link (3)	PO12
James Place Basingstoke (5)	RG25
James Place Andover (4)	SP11
Parkside (9)	GU12
Other (independent) (4)	SO18, SO24 RG23, PO21



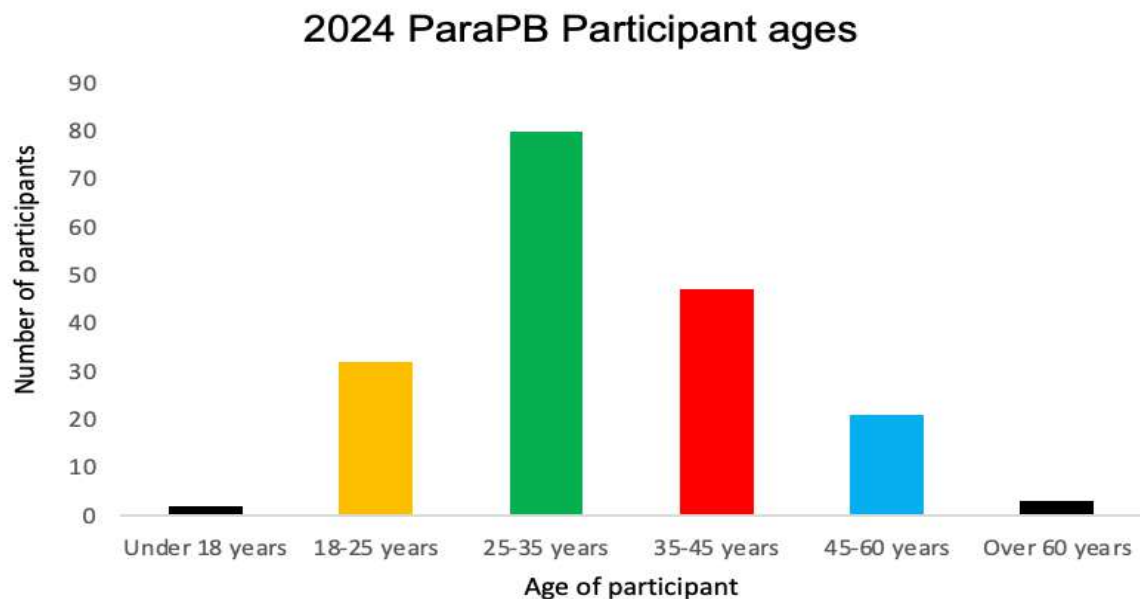
(Map adapted from GBMaps.com)

## Age of participants

The Para PB welcomed participants of all ages (10 years and above) to take part. The majority (69%) of participants in 2024 were aged 25-45 years. 32 participants (17%) were aged 18-25 years. Only 2 participants under 18 years; this is thought to be low due to the start of the new academic year for those in full time education and those in higher education. Another event, Energise Me's [Hampshire School Games](#) earlier in the summer also targets local SEND pupils from years 4, 5 and 6.

13% participants were over 45 years old. The oldest participant was 66 years. Service gaps are known to exist as people with LD age; they are more likely to live alone or with family and less likely to access day services. Health issues faced by midlife to older adults with LD (for example cardiovascular issues and arthritis) may have prevented some older individuals from taking part.

There is scope for this event to reach out to more participants in the under 25 years and over 45 years age ranges.



## ACCESSIBILITY AND EVENT ADJUSTMENTS



Representatives from Autism Hampshire (part of Avenues Group) attended the event to identify areas where improvements could enhance the experience for autistic participants. It is estimated that 70 Para PB 2024 participants have an autism diagnosis.

- 32.4% of people with learning disabilities also have an autism diagnosis – NHS, 2023.
- People with a learning disability are 26x more likely to have an autism diagnosis than those without

We look forward to implementing the recommendations from our friends at Autism Hampshire in 2025.

Autism Hampshire Feedback	Action in response to Feedback
Big groups of people at a busy venue.	Advise day services that the event may not suit some individuals, especially those who do not cope well in busy or noisy spaces. Advise day services around increasing the ratio of staff to service user to enable the provision of one-to-one support if/when required.
Crowding around registration at the beginning of the day.	Introduce a meet and greet service to escort groups from minibuses in the car park.
Uncertainty around country allocation on arrival.	Send out country allocations at least 48 hours prior to the event.
Difficulty for support staff and volunteers in recognising the needs of autistic participants (i.e. high energy approach may not suit all).	Autism awareness training for coaches, volunteers and key staff.
Transition between each activity may not be long enough for some participants to 'unhook' from one activity to the next.	Provide day services with a schedule of the day in advance so they can plan which activities to prioritise and to help reduce surprises.
Expectation for autistic participants to 'come out of their shell' and get swept along in general air of excitement and enthusiasm is unrealistic.	Coaches to provide parallel (quieter) options during each activity. Coaches and volunteers to encourage support staff to use the Quiet Spaces when needed.
Access to Quiet Spaces.	Ensure these are not used as a 'walk through'. Make areas a low stimulation environment (dim lights, noise cancelling headphones, weighted blanket).
Awards ceremony was loud and busy.	An alternative video awards ceremony to be emailed/shared on social media to congratulate participants - especially for those who prefer not to take part in the main ceremony.

The Winchester Para PB is in the process of applying for 'Autism Friendly Award' from the National Autistic Society, in recognition of the event's accessibility and its commitment to provide the best possible experience to all participants.



## Quiet Spaces



For some participants the Para PBs is a new, intimidating and high energy environment with many potentially triggering sensory stimuli (such as visual, noise, smell and movement). Quiet areas have been shown to help some people with autism and learning disabilities regulate their senses and reduce anxiety. The Quiet Space was designed to provide comfort, focus, and calm for people with sensory processing difficulties and/or anxiety. Soft matting floor, chairs to sit on, soft lights and sensory toys were provided. Information about the Quiet Spaces was included in the Carer and Participant Information pack and in the Volunteer briefing on zoom. 2024 saw the introduction of Para PB Quiet Spaces; an indoor Quiet Room and an outdoor Quiet Gazebo (the outdoor Quiet Gazebo was not used due to bad weather at the 2024 event forcing all activities indoors).

## Sensory and Information Guide



Maps were included in the information packs and shared with participants, carers, volunteers, coaches and the EMT two weeks prior to the event. Dave Serpell-Stevens, Senior Training and Development Specialist from Autism Hampshire was impressed and commented that "The pre-event information was very good and contained maps and even a sensory guide to the different venues and areas. This is not often the case with such events."

Sensory guides were created by [Autek CIC](#), using symbols to identify sensory stimuli that might affect cognitive and sensory processing issues.

## Feeding room

A private space was made available during the lunch break for a participant who requires specialist feeding.

## Video

The EMT tasked Autek CIC with creating the following 3 event videos.

- i. What it's Like - To help prepare participants and to reduce anxiety
- ii. Keeping Active - Pathways into regular sport for people with LD
- iii. Promotion and celebration of the Para PB model to funders and to other regions

Video provides a powerful communication tool with participants, carers, volunteers and supporters. Conversations with day services after the event has provided powerful reinforcement that a 'What it's Like' video will be valuable for preparing new and returning participants for the day.

The third video (promotion and celebration of the Para PB) is nearing completion at the time of writing this report.

## VOLUNTEERS

Another important outcome of the Para PB event is the social connection between participants and volunteers and the rich level of community engagement.

This is important because it is recognised that people with learning disabilities tend to have very limited social networks which contribute to poor health outcomes, low self-esteem, low confidence and a reduced sense of identity (Engage, Listen, Act. New Forest Mencap, 2024).

The event attracted 64 volunteers in 2024. Once introduced to the Para PB many volunteers (around 70%) return year on year. Employees from Santander, Simplyhealth, Ordnance Survey, Cardo Group attended as corporate volunteers. The event offers a valuable day away from the office where corporate volunteers strengthen team building skills, communication, empathy, leadership and problem solving.

Other volunteers were from connections with Hampshire Cricket Board, Hampshire Football Association, University of Winchester and Winchester Go LD, in addition to EMT

and instructor friends and family. For some corporate volunteers it is the first time they have been involved with the learning disability community.



23 volunteers (36%) attended the online (Zoom) briefing the evening before the event. All volunteers were sent a Volunteer and Coach welcome pack by email two weeks before the event. Post event interviews with 8 volunteers provides useful ideas for development, including: an event overview and introduction via video message before the day, a formal online volunteer registration process and more involvement of the learning disabled volunteers.

Volunteers frequently comment on their positive experience with the participants. They are struck by how friendly, sociable and welcoming the Para PB participants are.

*"Exhausting and brilliant!"*

*"Wow, what a day! So much enthusiasm. The participants are fabulous"*

*"A day filled with energy, joy, fun and courage. The participants are amazing and inspiring. I can't wait for the 2025 event."*

Some who helped at the Para PB event commit to regular volunteering roles (for example, Nicky, a volunteer from Simplyhealth, supervises Winchester Go LD's weekly online Thursday fitness class).

## EVENT IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

The ‘on the day’ impact is clear from watching and listening to participants, support staff, volunteers and coaches. These moments are captured in photographs and video clips. Participants are encouraged to try new activities and to achieve their personal best in a fun, sociable and inclusive way. The positive energy, social connections and growth in confidence of participants is evident throughout the day.



Here's what some participants have told us:

“I can't wait until the Para PB next year”

“Brilliant day with my friends”

“I really enjoyed the boxing, so I'm going to join the Disability Boxing group next week.”

“FANTASTIC!”

“The best day of the year”

“I love my medal”

## Celebration of achievement

Being awarded with medals and certificate is an important part of the day. Event founder and member of EMT, Kevin Stevens, explains “for some participants this is the first time that they have had public recognition for achievement”. Celebrating what participants can achieve in an inclusive, supportive and non-competitive environment is a key goal for the

event. The event boosts participant confidence and champions everyone for having a go, taking part and trying their best rather than focusing on what their disability might prevent them from doing.

6 trophies were awarded for biggest personal achievement in each of the 6 activities (football, squash, cricket, rugby, low level circuits/yoga and athletics). Two additional trophies, honouring a couple of extremely special individuals with learning disabilities whose strength of character, sportsmanship and courage continue to inspire the Para PB.

- Susan Hall Trophy – for overall Personal Best
- Lucy Parrot Trophy – for bravery and the biggest smile.



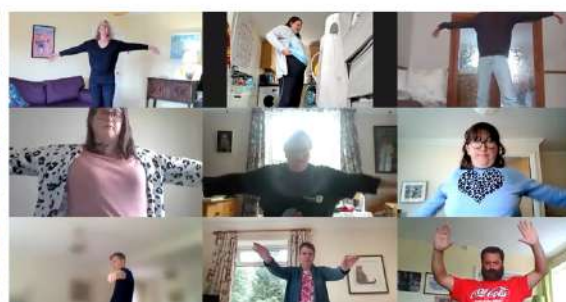
## Connecting to regular physical activity

There have been many successful introductions to regular physical activity since the launch of Para PB in 2012. Some groups have expanded and new groups have been formed. The EMT are keen to facilitate and monitor these connections.

- In April 2024 [Winchester Boxing Club](#) with the help of Para PB EMT members (Kevin Stevens and Betty Chadwick) launched a weekly disability boxing group with Winchester Go LD. 10-12 Winchester Go LD members regularly attend this session.

- [Winchester parkrun](#) have welcomed 5 Para PB participants to their weekly 5km run (both as runners and as marshals). James W has achieved 50 parkruns. Teddy has attended over 25 times as volunteer (in addition to taking part 50 times as a runner).
- Low level circuit training provided every Saturday afternoon by Everyone Active for Winchester Go LD members, attracts on average 20 people with learning disabilities.
- [Everyone Active](#) delivers two disability swimming groups (Thursday lunchtime and Friday evening). In partnership with Everyone Active, [Hampshire Football Association](#) runs a weekly disability football group on Monday mornings, at least 6 Para PB participants regularly attend.
- The Super 1's hosted by [Hampshire Cricket Board](#) offer another supportive and inclusive pathway into regular sport.
- Thursday afternoon badminton run by [Sport in Mind](#) is a popular and inclusive session, regularly attracting 4-5 adults with learning disabilities. Jane, a Para PB participant has taken up weekly yoga also run by Sport in Mind.
- Other activities include Winchester Go LD's programme of Walk and Talks, Thursday Fit Class and Tai Chi.

The EMT are committed to develop more connections opportunities and ways to track attendance of Para PB participants at regular physical activity.



## FUTURE PLANS

Motivated by the success and popularity of the Winchester Paralympic Personal Bests, the EMT see an opportunity for developing Personal Best events in more locations. In addition to planning for Winchester Personal Bests 2025, conversations are currently underway with new partners for a new 2025 event in Chichester.

The EMT is committed to making the Personal Best event as inclusive and accessible as possible. The positive and constructive feedback from colleagues at Autism Hampshire details specific areas for development. The EMT aim for the Winchester Personal Best to be the first ever accredited Autism Friendly 'event'.

Another important area is tracking the long-term impact the Para PB has on people with learning disabilities and their engagement with regular physical activity. In addition, the EMT will look at shorter term, measurable outcomes. This will involve more consultation with participants and the people supporting them (families, day services and support providers) as well as consultation with local activity providers (sports clubs, leisure centres, etc). Focus groups and feedback sessions were initiated in 2024, we look forward to extending this work further.

There is a local need for improved understanding of the choices (and barriers) people with learning disabilities in and around Winchester currently have in relation to taking up regular physical activity and what activities they would like. This will require further consultation with participants and the people supporting them (families, day services and support providers).

The EMT are looking to grow the Personal Best networks and work with organisations who share our focus on helping people with learning disabilities access regular physical activity. These organisations include: Mencap and Sport England's [MENCAP SPORT](#) program, [Special Olympics](#), [Active Partnerships](#) (e.g. [Energise Me](#) and [Active Sussex](#)) and [Sport Winchester](#).

## APPENDIX 1: Regular physical activity and participants

In addition to the benefits to physical health, exercise is known to improve the psychological wellbeing of people with learning disabilities, with benefits such as reduced anxiety, increased self-esteem and improved mood. There is an association between higher reported levels of physical activity and increased quality of life.

Several practical barriers experienced by many people with learning disabilities have been recognised, including cost, transport, difficulties accessing organised activities, lack of suitable activities, and lack of promotion of activities when available. Understanding how these and other barriers affect our local learning disability community and developing ways to overcome them is an important next step.

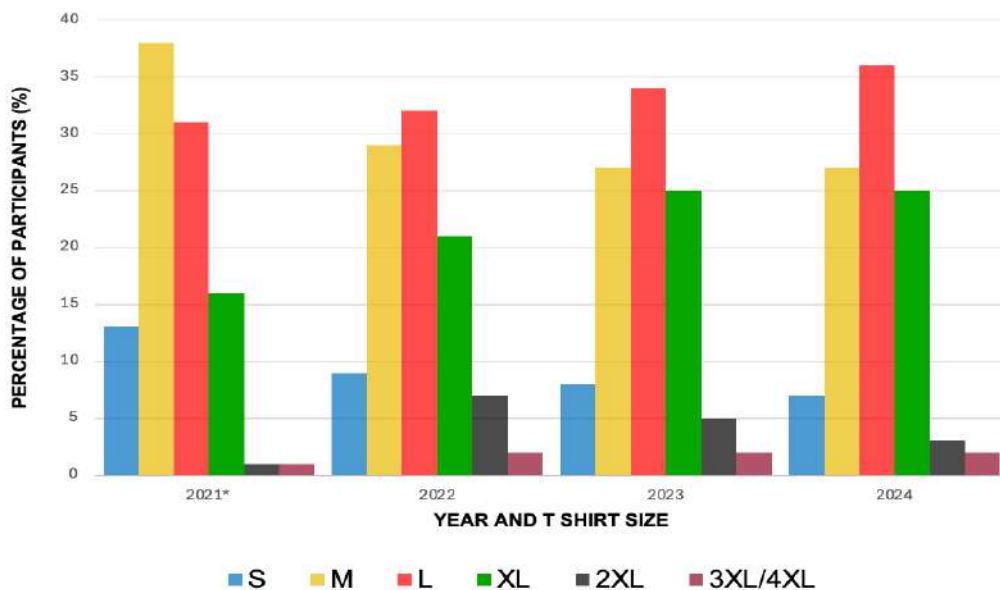
Two reasons why people may want to take part in physical activities – regardless of whether or not they have learning disabilities – are that they are enjoyable and sociable. There is, however, a need to respect individual preferences in terms of what is considered fun and enjoyable. For example, people with both learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorder (between which there is a high overlap) may prefer to avoid social activities, instead choosing to exercise alone. Similarly, while some people with learning disabilities enjoy taking part in competitive sports, others may prefer activities where there is less of a competitive element, such as dancing, swimming or walking (Nursing Times, 2018).



## APPENDIX 2: Obesity and participant weight management

It is well recognised that people with learning disabilities are at increased risk of being overweight or obese compared to the general population (UK Gov. Public Health England guidelines, updated Sept 2020). While good nutrition and behaviours around eating are the biggest factors to achieving healthy body weight; regular physical activity too plays an important and positive role in weight management.

### PARTICIPANT T SHIRT SIZES



2021\*

Two groups (21 individuals or 14% of total participants) were school children aged 11 to 16 years from Toynbee School and Osborne School, who had the smaller sized t-shirts.

T shirt sizes give an approximate indication of how many Para PB participants are overweight or obese. People with some learning disabilities, such as Down's Syndrome, Turner Syndrome and Prader Willi syndrome tend to be shorter than the general population. Care needs to be taken when comparing standard T shirt sizes to body mass.

