CHAMPIONING INCLUSION

HOW PERSONAL BEST EVENTS EMPOWER PARTICIPANTS, COACHES AND FUTURE TEACHERS

Kirsty Harris *and* ***Betty Chadwick***

INCLUSION MATTERS

WHY INCLUSION MATTERS IN PE

Children and young people with disabilities typically engage in less physical activity than their peers, placing them at greater risk of the consequences associated with limited participation (Carlon *et al*., 2013; Heah, Case, McGuire & Law, 2006). For physical education (PE) teachers, this means creating environments where every child feels confident to participate and progress. Research by Shields and Synnot (2016) highlights a common challenge: one-off participatory events rarely lead to sustained engagement. Such events, aimed at engaging young people with disabilities, rarely provide the sustained pathway needed to develop competence and confidence to progress.

A prerequisite to benefitting from sport and physical activity is initial participation and ensuring young people with disabilities stay in sport (Gould, 2019). This is where initiatives such as Personal Bests events seek to make a difference, bridging the gap between isolated opportunities and regular, meaningful participation in physical activity.

THE PERSONAL BESTS VISION

Personal Bests was created by Kevin Stevens (Founder of Personal Bests and Director, Active LD) and Betty Chadwick (Executive Director, Active LD). Betty and Kevin identified a clear need for accessible, inclusive sporting opportunities that extend beyond the one-off model, creating pathways for sustainable engagement. Since their inception, Personal Bests events have reached hundreds of participants, built club links and developed a growing network of volunteers and coaches committed to inclusion in sport.

CHICHESTER PERSONAL BEST 2025

In July 2025, the Chichester Personal Bests event welcomed 56 participants from four local learning disability groups. Hosted at the University of Chichester, participants took part in a range of sports, building confidence, forming friendships and celebrating personal achievement throughout the day.

The event plays a vital role in connecting individuals to local clubs and coaches, encouraging sustained engagement in regular physical activity. It also provides an invaluable platform for coaches, clubs and trainee teachers to develop inclusive practice and enhance accessibility for people with learning disabilities.

Alongside participants, the event was supported by 19 volunteers and provided valuable support for the 40 family carers. Caring for a young person with a learning disability places significant pressure on family dynamics, wellbeing and resilience, and these challenges are often under-recognised. Personal Bests created opportunities for carers to connect with peers, celebrate the achievements of participants and, in some cases, enjoy respite while visiting Chichester.

In the lead-up, Active LD delivered an autism awareness course, attended by 14 of the event's coaches and volunteers, ensuring the environment was both inclusive and supportive, further adding to the sustainable legacy of the project.

CREATING LASTING OPPORTUNITIES

One of the core aims of Personal Bests events is to build local networks and club links, ensuring sustainable, long-term opportunities for young people with learning disabilities. Research by Khan *et al.* (2012) links regular participation in sport to a better quality of life. This is particularly significant for young people with disabilities, who often engage in more solitary, home-based activities and have limited access to integrated leisure opportunities (Beart *et al*., 2001; Braun, Yeargin-Allsopp & Lollar, 2006).

These challenges can be further exacerbated as children with developmental disabilities transition into adulthood and lose access to structured educational support (Braun *et al*., 2006). This transition often leads to increased reliance on carers and support providers to identify what activities exist. Online signposting platforms such as *Every Body Moves* are helpful but depend on providers keeping information up to date. Some of the most apparent barriers young people with learning disabilities typically face include:

- difficulty in scheduling activities that suit individual and carer availability
- costs associated with participation
- limited or inaccessible transport options
- anxiety and overwhelm linked to trying new activities or joining unfamiliar groups (particularly for autistic people).

Shields *et al.* (2016) also note that participation often decreases as the skill gap widens and sports become more competitive, making inclusive entry points like Personal Bests events even more crucial. The launch of two new regular activity sessions following the Chichester Personal Bests event represents an important step toward creating sustainable opportunities for ongoing participation. By building on the connections formed among coaches, day services and participants during the event, pilot sessions have been initiated specifically for adults with learning disabilities. Early indications suggest strong engagement in these pilots. Notable examples include the introduction of a weekly tennis group in partnership with Chichester Racquets and Fitness Club and a monthly running group developed in collaboration with Chichester Runners and Athletics Club.

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ADDRESSING HEALTH INEQUALITIES

Evidence suggests that people with learning disabilities experience poorer health outcomes than their non-disabled peers (Allerton, Welch & Emerson, 2011). To further this the Learning Disability Mortality Review (LeDeR) findings continue to highlight stark health inequalities. In 2023, 39 per cent of deaths among people with learning disabilities were considered avoidable, almost double the rate of the general population. Adults with learning disabilities die, on average, 19.5 years younger than their peers, and nearly 60 per cent of those reviewed died before age 65 (White *et al.*, 2024).

Nationally, obesity rates are higher among individuals with learning disabilities, placing them at higher risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and certain cancers, highlighting the urgent need for these targeted, accessible physical activity opportunities (Perera *et al.*, 2020). Young people with learning disabilities often face additional challenges in understanding and managing these conditions, leading to poorer health outcomes and increased strain on health and social care.

"The Personal Bests truly highlight the energy, determination and courage of everyone taking part. Each participant gave their all and was celebrated for doing their personal best; it was inspiring and joyful. None of this would be possible without the incredible dedication of our coaches and volunteers. The Personal Bests provide a fantastic platform to encourage more people with learning disabilities to get involved in regular activities that keep them active, healthy and happy."

Betty Chadwick
(Executive Director, Active LD)

Mental health inequalities are also pronounced in this group. Adults with learning disabilities experience higher rates of depression, anxiety and social isolation. More severe mental illnesses, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, are more prevalent in this population, often alongside comorbidities such as autism, epilepsy and sensory impairments (National Guidelines Alliance, 2016).

Around one-third of people with learning disabilities are autistic, compared with approximately one per cent of the general population (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2024). At the Chichester Personal Bests, 17 participants (31 per cent) identified as autistic. Autism affects communication, social interaction, sensory processing and behaviour, making thoughtful adjustments essential for inclusion.

Other neurodiverse conditions such as ADHD, dyspraxia and dyslexia are also frequently recognised in people with learning disabilities. ADHD affects more global skills and executive functions, like the ability to focus, the ability to control emotions and the ability to control impulsive behaviours (Bonti *et al.*, 2024). Dyspraxia affects motor coordination, visual perception, spatial awareness, short-term working memory and organisation of tasks and thoughts. Dyslexia disrupts how the brain processes written language. People with dyslexia have trouble with reading and related skills (British Dyslexia Association N.D). Understanding and adapting to these challenges is particularly relevant to the planning and delivery of inclusive sports events, like the Personal Bests.

Perera *et al.* (2020) also found that young people with learning disabilities often receive little or no guidance on improving their health through exercise. Physical activity is still not consistently prioritised for this group (Ginis *et al.*, 2021). Sport England's Active Lives Adult Survey (2016-2017) found that only 51 per cent of people with one impairment met World Health Organisation (WHO) physical activity guidelines. This dropped to 45 per cent for those with two impairments and 36 per cent for those with three or more. Recent data (2023-2024) continues to reflect these disparities.

THE HOLISTIC BENEFITS OF SPORT

As practitioners in PE and sport, we understand the holistic benefits of regular physical activity, enhancing not only physical health but also mental wellbeing, confidence and social connection. Snyder *et al.* (2010) found that children who participate in sport score higher on measures of happiness, social functioning and mental health, areas often identified as challenges for those with learning disabilities. The social interactions gained from participation in both structured (organised and competitive) and unstructured (social) community sports clubs are often the catalysts leading to enhanced involvement and participation. Social interactions such as connectedness, social support, peer-bonding and increased self-esteem have been shown to reduce anxiety and depression (Eime *et al.*, 2010). Coupled with social interactions, championing individual achievements in a non-competitive, supportive environment is vital for building confidence and encouraging continued participation. This can often be the case for young people with learning disabilities and their counterparts alike (Apicella, Demiral & Mollerstrom, 2020). Within a learning disability community, levels of ability and experience vary enormously, making direct comparison inappropriate. Celebrating each person's personal best reinforces that everyone is valued for their effort, progress and joy in participation.

"This feels like the best day of my life! I love all different sports and it's been amazing to try everything. I'd love to do more days like this again."

Henry (participant with learning disabilities)

EMPOWERING FUTURE EDUCATORS

As well as the benefits for participants, Personal Bests events also provide invaluable experiences for trainee teachers, giving them opportunities to work alongside specialist coaches and participants with special educational needs (SEND) in real-world settings.

"The Chichester Personal Bests event has created a lasting impact that reaches far beyond the day itself. It has inspired new opportunities such as a disability tennis group and a running group, giving participants more ways to stay active and connected. We're proud that Personal Bests empowers volunteers and coaches, strengthens local clubs and shows how inclusive sport can bring lasting change to individuals and communities."

Kevin Stevens (Founder of Personal Best and Director, Active LD)

Trainee teacher Charlotte Turner reflected:

"As a fourth-year trainee PE teacher, I volunteered at the Chichester Personal Bests event to deepen my understanding of inclusive practice and support young people with learning disabilities. The event showed the power of sport to connect, empower and include. Inclusion isn't just about access; it's about belonging. I learned how structure, flexibility and small adjustments help every learner thrive. My confidence grew as I adapted communication, instruction and activity design. Volunteering was incredibly fulfilling and developed my skills. Opportunities like this should continue to be embedded in teacher training."

Trainee Hope Monahan shared a similar experience:

"I volunteered for the Personal Bests event after doing a module on SEND and holding an inclusion festival for local schools. I wanted to step out of my comfort zone, meet new people and gain experience working with young adults with SEND. My highlight was seeing everyone receive their certificates and medals; the pride on their faces was unforgettable. The experience reinforced my self-belief, and I'd tell others to do it, 100%!"

"It was brilliant to catch up with friends. I loved everything today, especially the running and football."

Aiden (participant with learning disabilities)

BUILDING TEACHER CONFIDENCE IN INCLUSION

These reflections are particularly relevant given the steady rise in the number of children with SEND in state-funded mainstream schools in England since 2017 (DfE, 2025). In January 2025, there were over 1.7 million pupils with SEND, representing 19.6 per cent of all pupils. Around 1.3 million received SEND support, while approximately 500,000 had an education and health care plan (EHCP) (DfE, 2025).

Despite this growth, Loveys (2022) found that many teachers feel under-resourced, under-supported and under-trained to meet the needs of these learners. Winter (2006) similarly reported that while 89 per cent of teachers support the concept of inclusion, many still face significant challenges in practice.

Shields *et al.* (2016) further highlight how social barriers and negative attitudes can influence participation. The attitudes of teachers, peers and those closest to children with disabilities play a crucial role in shaping participation levels. It is therefore essential that future teachers are equipped with confidence, knowledge and practical skills to foster inclusive environments and challenge stigma.

LOOKING AHEAD

Following a successful first year, the Personal Bests team has ambitious plans. Discussions are in place to scale up significantly, with a view to double participation in year two and expand until full capacity is reached. Connections with local sports clubs and day services will be supported throughout the year and regular, accessible groups encouraged and supported.

This growth will extend opportunities for meaningful, long-term engagement in sport for the wider local learning disability community, coupled with creating valuable learning opportunities for early career PE teachers and sports coaches. The team also intends to apply for Autism Friendly accreditation from the National Autistic Society, a kitemark which formally recognises commitment to inclusive and autism-aware practice.

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WHAT YOU CAN DO IN YOUR PE LESSONS

- Introduce personal best challenges in lessons.
- Audit your PE curriculum for accessibility.
- Create sensory-friendly zones in your sports hall.
- Partner with local clubs for inclusive opportunities.
- Advocate for inclusion in whole-school sport policies.

Inclusion is not an add-on: it is a mindset. By championing personal bests, PE teachers can empower every learner to experience the joy and benefits of physical activity.

For more information about Personal Best events, visit **https://www.activeld.org/personal-bests** ■

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Kirsty Harris is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Chichester and **Betty Chadwick** is Executive Director at Active LD.

Key lessons for PE teachers

1. **Celebrate effort, not comparison**
   Personal Bests events focus on each participant's achievement rather than competition. This approach can transform your PE lessons. Recognising effort and progress, not just winning, builds confidence and motivation.

2. **Plan for diversity**
   Expect a wide range of abilities and experiences. Adapt activities with flexible rules, varied equipment and differentiated roles. Small adjustments, like visual cues, simplified instructions or sensory-friendly spaces make a big difference.

3. **Create belonging through social connection**
   Inclusion is not just access; it is belonging. Pair pupils for peer-support, encourage teamwork and celebrate achievements together. Social interaction reduces isolation and boosts mental wellbeing.

4. **Prepare for neurodiversity**
   Around one-third of learners with learning disabilities are autistic. Others may have ADHD, dyspraxia or dyslexia. Strategies include clear routines, predictable transitions and calm spaces for regulation.

5. **Engage families and carers**
   Communication with families helps to overcome barriers like transport, scheduling and anxiety. Share local opportunities and signposting platforms, e.g. **https://everybodymoves.org.uk/**

6. **Build your confidence in inclusion**
   Many teachers feel under-trained for inclusion. Seek professional learning in SEND, autism awareness and adaptive PE. Volunteering at inclusive events, like Personal Bests, provides invaluable experience.