



## People with learning disabilities and the Paralympics

### BRIEFING SHEET

#### Terminology

The terms learning disabilities, learning disability and intellectual disabilities[y] are used interchangeably and mean the same thing. Learning disabilities is the official UK term, whilst intellectual disability is used more internationally.

#### Definition

The most accepted definition of learning/intellectual disability is that used by the World Health Organisation:

*Intellectual disability means a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information and to learn and apply new skills (impaired intelligence). This results in a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning), and begins before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development.<sup>1</sup>*

#### Diagnosis

To assess if a person has learning/intellectual disabilities, using the above definition, three areas are assessed. Firstly their level of intelligence by using an IQ test, secondly their level of independent functioning using either a validated measure or clinical observation, and thirdly evidence is gathered to ascertain that these impairments were present usually before the age of 18. This third element is to distinguish between people with acquired neurological impairments.

#### People with Learning/intellectual disabilities and the Paralympic Games

Paralympic is from the Greek preposition παρά, pará ("beside" or "alongside") and refers to a competition held in parallel with the Olympic Games.

Elite athletes with learning/intellectual disabilities were first included in the Atlanta, 1996 Paralympic Games. However, at the following Sydney 2000 Games, it was found that cheating had occurred and some individuals without disabilities had posed as people with learning/intellectual disabilities. As a result the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) made the decision that athletes with learning/intellectual disabilities should not be included in the games until it could be shown that the systems of testing eligibility and classification were rigorous and robust. At the IPC general assembly in 2009, on the basis of developing evidence of improved systems for eligibility and classification the decision was made to re-include athletes for London 2012. Initially this inclusion will be in the sports of athletics (1500m, shot put, long jump), table tennis and swimming, but it is anticipated that more sports will be included for Rio in 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/noncommunicable-diseases/mental-health/news/news/2010/15/childrens-right-to-family-life/definition-intellectual-disability> retrieved 14/2/12

## Organisations supporting elite athletes with learning/intellectual disabilities



[www.inas.org](http://www.inas.org)

*"We believe that athletes with an intellectual disability should have the opportunity to compete at the highest level in sport"*

Inas is an international charity and the recognised International Federation (IOSD) for athletes with an intellectual disability. It is a global organisation that promotes inclusion through sport and is a full member of the International Paralympic Committee representing intellectual disability.

We manage an annual programme of more than 15 Regional and World Championship competitions working closely with the International Federations for sport, maintain Regional and World records/rankings, and manage the eligibility and classification process for athletes with an intellectual disability.

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**The International Paralympic Committee**

[www.paralympic.org](http://www.paralympic.org)

The IPC's vision is *'To enable Paralympic athletes to achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world'*.

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) is the global governing body of the Paralympic Movement. Its purpose is to organize the summer and winter Paralympic Games and act as the International Federation for nine sports, supervising and coordinating World Championships and other competitions.

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**UK SPORTS ASSOCIATION  
FOR PEOPLE WITH  
LEARNING DISABILITY**

[www.uksportsassociation.org](http://www.uksportsassociation.org)

Our overall mission is to encourage the development of sustainable, integrated quality sports provision for people with learning disability from grass roots through to elite International opportunities and to develop the potential of people with learning disability by encouraging and facilitating their participation in sporting activities at United Kingdom and International level; advancing through sport their education, training and social development assisting their integration into society.

UKSA's role is unique as it is the only organisation for sport for people with learning disability that has a truly UK wide remit and it has the responsibility for classification of athletes with learning disability in the UK.

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[www.mencap.org.uk/sport](http://www.mencap.org.uk/sport)

*Mencap Sport believes that people with a learning disability should have the same opportunities to participate, enjoy and excel in sport at all levels.*

Mencap Sport works with the governing bodies of sport and other sports providers to promote opportunities for people with a learning disability at all levels.

## Frequently asked questions

Question: *What is the difference between the Paralympics and the Special Olympics?*

Answer: The Special Olympics is a large, international organisation which promotes sports inclusion for everybody with intellectual disability, no matter what their level of disability or level of competition.



“The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community. “



The Paralympics is focussed specifically on elite athletes and the highest level of competition.



INAS is a sports federation which is for athletes with intellectual disabilities, but for those who wish, and have the potential, to compete at an elite level and is a full member of the International Paralympic Committee.

Question: *So do people with Learning/Intellectual disabilities compete against people with other disabilities?*

Answer: No, The International Paralympic Committee has established 10 impairment groups based upon the definitions described in the World Health Organization International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health<sup>2</sup>. Intellectual Impairment is one of those groups, which means that only people in that group compete against each other. The first step is to ensure that the athlete has the **eligibility** to compete in that impairment group. Then, *“to ensure competition is fair and equal, all Paralympic sports have a system in place which ensures that winning is determined by skill, fitness, power, endurance, tactical ability and mental focus, the same factors that account for success in sport for able bodied athletes. This process is called **classification** and it’s purpose is to minimise the impact of impairments on the competition outcome. Through classification, it is determined which athletes are eligible to compete in a sport and how athletes are grouped together for competition..... This, to a certain extent, is similar to grouping athletes by age, gender or weight. In*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/>

*Paralympic Sport, athletes are grouped by the degree of activity limitation resulting from the impairment. Such 'groups' are named 'Sport Classes'.*<sup>3</sup>

For London 2012 the sports classes in which people with learning/intellectual disabilities will be competing in are, for swimming S14, athletics T/F20 and table tennis T11.

*Question: So how do you know that somebody is really eligible to compete in the intellectual disability impairment group?*

Answer: Inas is responsible for this procedure which is called **primary eligibility** and only those who appear on the Inas master list are eligible to compete at Inas events and have the potential to compete at International Paralympic Committee sanctioned events. Inas has an eligibility committee which consists of experienced psychologists from around the regions of the world. If an athlete wants to get on the Inas master list i.e. be seen as able to compete in the intellectual disabilities impairment group, they must submit a portfolio of evidence to this committee. The portfolio will include evidence pertaining to each of the three areas of the definition of learning/intellectual disability, an IQ assessment, an assessment of adaptive behaviour and evidence of onset before age 18. These assessments must have been carried out by a qualified psychologist who must prepare a report and provide a signed testimonial that the athlete meets the required criteria. This is then checked and signed by a National Eligibility Officer before it is submitted to the central Inas eligibility committee. The portfolio of evidence is then submitted to 2-3 independent members of the committee, who scrutinise the documents for authenticity and to see if the stated criteria have been met. If they have the athlete is confirmed onto the master list, if not more information may be required or the athlete is judged not to meet the eligibility criteria.

If you want to know more about this process visit:

<http://www.inas.org/technical/eligibility-and-classification/>

*Question: So what about sports classification for people with learning/intellectual disabilities?*

Answer: Even though there is only currently one class for athletes with learning/intellectual disabilities to compete in for IPC sanctioned competitions they must still go through **classification**. This is because although they meet the initial eligibility criteria the impairment must be shown to impact on the performance of that specific sport i.e. the impact

An example of this would be

An example of this would be a person who has a left hand amputation, but is an excellent right handed pistol shot and an excellent swimmer, with pistol shooting he may qualify for the Olympics but in swimming he may qualify for the Paralympics.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.paralympic.org/Classification/Introduction>

of the impairment must be shown to affect the activities required to perform that sport at a high level. Hence, whilst meeting the eligibility criteria for the impairment group it is possible that an athlete meets the classification criteria in one sport whilst not meeting it in another sport.

For learning/intellectual disabilities classification is very complex as less is known about the impact of impaired cognitive abilities on the performance of sport. Hence a research group was put together between Inas and the IPC to develop a sports classification procedure for swimming, table tennis and athletics – the three events for athletes with learning/intellectual disabilities at London 2012. The research group worked from a conceptual model of how different types of intelligence impacted on the different types of cognitive skills needed to perform different sports. Some are generic skills such as good reaction time which is needed in most sports and others more event based, such as the ability to adjust your pace. From this a methodology was evolved to measure these abilities through a computerised test, sports specific technical tests and observation and this has now become the classification procedures for the intellectual impairment group in athletics, swimming and table tennis.

To find out more go to:

About the work of the research group: <http://www.inas.org/technical/eligibility-and-classification/>

Athletics classification: [http://ipc-athletics.paralympic.org/export/sites/ipc\\_sports\\_athletics/Classification/2011\\_11\\_02\\_IPC\\_Athletics\\_Classification\\_Regulations\\_FINAL.pdf](http://ipc-athletics.paralympic.org/export/sites/ipc_sports_athletics/Classification/2011_11_02_IPC_Athletics_Classification_Regulations_FINAL.pdf)

Swimming Classification: [http://www.ipc-swimming.org/export/sites/ipc\\_sports\\_swimming/Classification/2011\\_05\\_30\\_Swimming\\_Classification\\_Regulations.pdf](http://www.ipc-swimming.org/export/sites/ipc_sports_swimming/Classification/2011_05_30_Swimming_Classification_Regulations.pdf)

Table Tennis Classification: <http://www.ipttc.org/classification/index.htm>

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