

# LEARNING DISABILITIES: A WORKING DEFINITION

## INTRODUCTION

The [Public Health Observatory](#) and the [Confidential Inquiry](#) have been set up by the Department of Health to provide knowledge and information that will enable health and social care agencies improve the health and well-being of people with learning disabilities in England.

This document defines what is meant by ‘people with learning disabilities’ and gives some practical guidance on who does and does not fall within this definition and, as a result, who does and does not fall within the remit of the Observatory and the Inquiry.

## THE CURRENT DEFINITION OF ‘LEARNING DISABILITY’

*Valuing People*, the 2001 White Paper on the health and social care of people with learning disabilities, included the following definition of learning disabilities.

*‘Learning disability includes the presence of:*

- *a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills (impaired intelligence), with;*
- *a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning);*
- *which started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development(1).*

This definition is broadly consistent with that used in the current version of the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Disease (ICD-10), although this does use the outdated and (to many) offensive term ‘mental retardation’(2, 3). The term learning disability was introduced in the UK to replace the term ‘mental handicap’.

## ‘LEARNING DISABILITY’, ‘LEARNING DIFFICULTY’ & ‘INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY’

Many people with learning disabilities prefer to use the term ‘learning difficulty’. The two terms are interchangeable when used in the context of health and social care for adults.

However, in UK education services, the term ‘learning difficulty’ also includes people who have ‘specific learning difficulties’ (e.g., dyslexia), but who do not have a significant general impairment in intelligence. However, the Special Educational Needs (SEN) codes of ‘moderate learning difficulty’, ‘severe learning difficulty’ and ‘profound multiple learning difficulty’ all refer to generalised learning difficulty of

varying severity (4). Taken together they can be considered to be interchangeable with the adult health and social care term ‘learning disability’. However, people with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia do not have ‘learning disabilities’.

The UK is the *only* country that uses the term ‘learning disability’ in this way. An increasing number of international organisations and countries (e.g., USA, Canada, Australia) use the term ‘intellectual disability’. This term has also recently been used in Professor Mansell’s report on services for people with severe and profound learning disabilities (5). The term ‘intellectual disability’ should be considered interchangeable with the UK term ‘learning disability’.

It should be noted that some countries (most notably the USA) use the term ‘learning disability’ to refer to people with ‘specific learning difficulties’ such as dyslexia. There is no overlap at all between these two uses of the term ‘learning disabilities’. As such, evidence from the USA on services or intervention for people with ‘learning disabilities’ may have little or no relevance to policy or practice in relation to people with learning disabilities in the UK.

## LEARNING DISABILITY, AUTISM AND OTHER DISABILITIES OR IMPAIRMENTS

Some people with learning disabilities also have physical and/or sensory impairments mental health problems or other ‘neurodevelopment disorders’ such as autism. People who have learning disabilities and other conditions are included in the group of people with learning disabilities *as long as they also have learning disabilities*. As such, people with Asperger’s Syndrome are not included in this term as by definition they have average or above average intelligence (1). Further, people with brain injury or trauma sustained in adulthood would not fall within the definition of having learning disabilities.

## IDENTIFYING PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: PRACTICAL STEPS

The Observatory will be identifying people with learning disabilities within a range of surveys and administrative datasets. The Inquiry will be identifying people with learning disabilities in a range of health and social care agencies.

### CHILDREN

Children will be considered to have a learning disability if *any* of the following conditions are met:

1. They have been identified within education services as having a Special Educational Need (SEN) associated with ‘moderate learning difficulty’, ‘severe learning difficulty’ or ‘profound multiple learning difficulty’. Children aged 7 or older should be at the School Action Plus stage of assessment or have a

Statement of SEN (6, 7). Younger children should also be included if they are at the School Action stage of assessment of SEN.

2. They score lower than two standard deviations below the mean on a validated test of general cognitive functioning (equivalent to an IQ score of less than 70) or general development. Care should, however, be taken when considering the results of tests carried out in English on children below the age of 7 living in bi-lingual households or households where English is not spoken.
3. They have been identified as having learning disabilities on locally held disability registers (including registers held by GP practices or Primary Care Trusts).

## ADULTS

Adults will be considered to have a learning disability if *any* of the following conditions are met:

1. When a child they were identified within education services as having a Special Educational Need (SEN) associated with 'moderate learning difficulty', 'severe learning difficulty' or 'profound multiple learning difficulty'.
2. They attended a special school or unit for children with 'moderate learning difficulty (or mental handicap)', 'severe learning difficulty (or mental handicap)' or 'profound multiple learning difficulty (or mental handicap)'.
3. When a child they scored lower than two standard deviations below the mean on a validated test of general cognitive functioning (equivalent to an IQ score of less than 70).
4. As an adult they scored lower than two standard deviations below the mean on a validated test of general cognitive functioning and there is good evidence to suggest that they have had difficulties in learning since childhood. Care should, however, be taken when considering the results of tests carried out in English on adults for whom English is not their first language, or where the person is experiencing disrupted mental health at the time of the test.
5. They have been identified as having learning disabilities on locally held disability registers (including registers held by GP practices or Primary Care Trusts) or by relevant Read Codes in health information systems.
6. They report having significant difficulties in literacy *and* numeracy and there is good evidence to suggest that they have had these difficulties since childhood.
7. They screen positive for learning disabilities using a validated screening test (8, 9).
8. In response to survey questions, they identify themselves as having a long-term illness, health condition or disability associated with 'learning disabilities' (or equivalent term) and have low educational attainment (equivalent to no GCSEs at grade C or above).

## REFERENCES

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