

The Evolution and Combination of Policy Instruments for After-School Sports Services in Britain: An Analysis Based on Policy Instrument Theory

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Abstract: Policy instruments are the essential means through which governments translate policy intentions into practical outcomes. The systematic selection, combination, and evolution of policy instruments constitute a central issue in the study of public policy. This study employs a qualitative documentary research approach, drawing on policy instrument theory as an analytical framework to systematically examine the evolution and combination of policy instruments in British after-school sports services from 2013 to 2025. Through the collection and analysis of publicly available policy documents, official guidance, funding frameworks, and evaluation reports, the study identifies and categorises the policy instruments deployed across different stages of policy development. The findings reveal that Britain has developed a comprehensive portfolio of policy instruments encompassing four categories: authoritative instruments (regulations, standards, and accountability mechanisms), incentive-based instruments (dedicated funding and grants), capacity-building instruments (professional development and resource toolkits), and learning-based instruments (data monitoring, pilot programs, and networking). The study further identifies a distinctive evolutionary trajectory from a predominantly incentive-based approach toward a balanced combination of authoritative, capacity-building, and learning instruments. The interaction among these instruments follows a logic of complementarity, creating a coherent policy delivery system. This research contributes to the comparative study of after-school sports policies by providing a systematic analysis of instrument choice and combination, offering insights for countries seeking to develop or refine their own policy frameworks for extracurricular physical activity provision.

Keywords: Policy instruments; After-school sports services; British education policy; Policy instrument theory; PE and Sport Premium

1. Introduction

The gap between policy intentions and implementation outcomes has long been a central concern in public policy research ^[1]. At the heart of this concern lies the question of policy instruments, the means and techniques through which governments seek to achieve their policy objectives ^[2]. The systematic selection, combination, and adaptation of policy instruments determine not only the effectiveness of policy delivery but also the distribution of costs and benefits among stakeholders ^[3]. In the field of education and youth services, the challenge of instrument choice is particularly acute, as policy goals often involve complex behavioural changes across multiple actors, including schools, teachers, parents, community organisations, and young people themselves ^[4].

After-school sports services have emerged as an important policy domain in many advanced industrial societies, reflecting growing concerns about youth physical inactivity, childhood obesity, and the holistic development of children and adolescents ^[5]. These services occupy a distinctive space at the intersection of education policy, sports policy, health policy, and social policy, requiring coordination across traditionally separate governmental departments and professional domains ^[6]. The design of effective policy instruments for after-school sports provision therefore presents significant challenges, including the need to balance central direction with local autonomy, ensure equitable access while promoting quality improvement, and sustain long-term commitment amid competing political priorities. Britain offers a particularly instructive case for examining the evolution and combination of policy instruments in after-school sports services. Since the introduction of the PE and Sport Premium in 2013, the British

government has developed a sophisticated and increasingly refined portfolio of policy instruments aimed at improving the quality and breadth of physical education and extracurricular sport in state-funded primary schools ^[7]. This policy framework has evolved through multiple stages, incorporating new instruments, adjusting existing ones, and reconfiguring the relationships among different instrument types in response to emerging evidence and changing priorities ^[8,9]. The British case thus provides a rich empirical basis for investigating how governments learn and adapt their instrument choices over time. Despite the growing body of literature on British after-school sports policy, existing research has predominantly focused on policy content, implementation challenges, or outcome evaluation ^[10]. Relatively little attention has been paid to the systematic analysis of policy instruments themselves, their types, combinations, evolutionary patterns, and interactive dynamics. This gap is significant because understanding the instrument portfolio is essential for explaining how policy works in practice and for drawing transferable lessons for other contexts.

This study therefore seeks to address the following research questions: (1) What categories of policy instruments have been deployed in British after-school sports services since 2013? (2) How have these instruments evolved over time, and what patterns characterise their combination? (3) What logics of interaction, complementarity, substitution, or conflict, can be observed among different instrument types? To answer these questions, the study adopts policy instrument theory as its primary analytical framework. This theoretical lens provides a systematic vocabulary for classifying instruments, analysing their properties, and examining their interrelationships. The study employs a qualitative documentary research method, collecting and analysing publicly available policy documents, official guidance, funding frameworks, evaluation reports, and professional commentary published between 2013 and 2025. By identifying, categorising, and tracing the evolution of policy instruments, the research constructs a comprehensive account of instrument choice and combination in the British context. The significance is twofold. Theoretically, it extends policy instrument theory to the underexplored domain of after-school sports services. Practically, it offers systematic insights for other countries—including China under the Double Reduction policy—seeking to design effective instrument portfolios for extracurricular physical activity provision. By illuminating the logic of instrument evolution and combination in Britain, the study serves as a reference for comparative policy analysis and context-sensitive policy learning.

2. Theoretical Framework: Policy Instrument Theory

Policy instrument theory provides the conceptual foundation for this study. This section outlines the key concepts, classificatory schemes, and analytical logics that inform the research.

2.1. Defining Policy Instruments

Policy instruments, also referred to as governing instruments, policy tools, or policy techniques, are the means through which governments seek to achieve policy objectives and influence the behaviour of target populations. They represent the operational dimension of public policy, translating abstract goals into concrete actions ^[11]. The study of policy instruments focuses on questions of instrument choice, design, combination, and change, examining why certain instruments are selected over others and how they perform in practice. A fundamental insight from the policy instruments literature is that instruments are not neutral technical devices but carry embedded assumptions about causality, human behaviour, and the proper relationship between state and society ^[12]. Different instruments reflect different theories of change and different distributions of authority between governmental and non-governmental actors. The choice of policy instruments therefore has normative as well as technical dimensions, implicating questions of democratic governance, administrative capacity, and social equity.

2.2. Classifying Policy Instruments

A range of classificatory schemes has been developed to organise the diversity of policy instruments. One of the most influential is Hood's (1983) NATO scheme ^[13], which distinguishes four categories based on the resources governments command: Nodality (information), Authority (legal power), Treasure (financial resources), and Organisation (direct administrative capacity). This scheme highlights the different resource bases upon which instruments draw and the different mechanisms through which they operate. An alternative approach, developed by Schneider and Ingram (1990) ^[14], classifies instruments according to the behavioural assumptions they embody and the types of policy signals they send. The typology distinguishes five instrument categories: authoritative (legal rules/mandates), incentive-based (material rewards/sanctions), capacity-building (information, training, resources), learning-based

(persuasion, problem-solving, adaptation), and symbolic/hortatory (appeals to values). This study adopts the first four. Authoritative instruments use government's legitimate authority to mandate or regulate (laws, standards, inspections), assuming compliance follows clear rules and enforcement. Incentive-based instruments shape behaviour through grants, subsidies, or fines, assuming rational responses to cost-benefit changes. Capacity-building instruments provide training, technical assistance, and resources, assuming non-compliance often reflects lack of knowledge or capability, not unwillingness. Learning-based instruments foster deliberation, experimentation, feedback, and adaptation via pilots, performance measurement, and professional networks, assuming policy goals are best achieved through ongoing learning and adjustment. The fourfold classification is not mutually exclusive in practice. Many policy instruments combine elements of multiple types, and the same instrument may be classified differently depending on its design and implementation^[14]. The value of the classification lies in its heuristic utility for analysing instrument portfolios and tracing changes in instrument mix over time.

2.3. Instrument Combinations and Interaction

A central insight of contemporary policy instrument theory is that instruments are rarely used in isolation but are combined into portfolios or mixes^[15]. The effectiveness of an instrument depends not only on its intrinsic properties but also on its relationship to other instruments operating in the same policy space. Instrument combinations may exhibit three types of interaction: Complementarity occurs when the effects of one instrument reinforce or amplify the effects of another. For example, authoritative instruments that mandate reporting may complement incentive-based instruments that provide funding by ensuring that funded activities are visible and accountable. Substitution occurs when one instrument can replace another in achieving the same policy objective. For example, capacity-building instruments may substitute for authoritative instruments if enhancing capability reduces the need for regulation. Conflict occurs when instruments work at cross-purposes, undermining each other's effectiveness. For example, incentive-based instruments that reward certain activities may conflict with authoritative instruments that impose requirements inconsistent with those activities. Understanding these interactive logics is essential for designing coherent instrument portfolios and diagnosing why some policy mixes underperform.

2.4. Instrument Evolution and Policy Learning

Policy instruments are not static but evolve over time in response to performance feedback, political shifts, and changing problem definitions. Instrument evolution may take several forms, including: the addition of new instruments to address gaps or weaknesses in existing portfolios; the refinement or recalibration of existing instruments (e.g., adjusting grant levels or reporting requirements); and the replacement of one instrument type with another (e.g., shifting from incentive-based to authoritative instruments when voluntary approaches prove insufficient). The concept of policy learning is central to understanding instrument evolution. Governments may learn from their own implementation experiences, from systematic evaluations, from comparison with other jurisdictions, or from changing professional and scientific knowledge. Learning may lead to instrumental adjustments or to deeper paradigmatic shifts.

3. Methods

This study was supported by Scientific Research Fund of Hunan Provincial Education Department, China (Grant No. 23B0554). It adopts a qualitative documentary research design. It does not proceed from a pre-existing hypothesis but rather, through systematic collection, coding, and categorisation of documentary evidence, identifies patterns of instrument choice, combination, and evolution.

3.1. Data Sources and Collection

The research data consists of publicly available documents related to British after-school sports services published between 2013 and 2025. The starting point of 2013 marks the introduction of the PE and Sport Premium, which represents the most significant and sustained policy intervention in this domain. The endpoint of 2025 reflects the most recent available policy documents at the time of analysis. Data sources include four categories: Primary Policy Documents: These include the core policy texts establishing and governing the PE and Sport Premium, including the annual conditions of grant;^[7]^[16]^[17]^[18] the School Sport and Activity Action Plan^[8]; and strategy documents from the Department for

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Sport England. Official Guidance and Frameworks: These include detailed guidance on the use of the PE and Sport Premium, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, safeguarding guidance for after-school clubs, and governance guidance for school leaders. Evaluation and Research Reports: These include official evaluations commissioned by the Department for Education; thematic reviews from Ofsted ^[9] ^[19]; and research reports from the Education Endowment Foundation and the Youth Sport Trust. Professional Commentary and Case Studies: These include articles, reports, and case study collections published by professional and in professional media. Documents were identified through purposive sampling using keyword searches on the UK Government's official website, e.g., GOV.UK, the websites of relevant non-departmental public bodies e.g., Ofsted, Sport England, academic databases e.g., Google Scholar, ERIC, and professional organisation platforms. The search terms included combinations of "PE and Sport Premium", "after-school sport", "extracurricular physical activity", "policy instruments", "funding", "guidance", "monitoring", and "evaluation". A total of 78 documents were initially identified as potentially relevant. After screening for relevance, authority, and information richness, 53 documents were included in the final analysis corpus.

3.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a structured, theory-driven iterative process in four phases. Phase 1: Instrument identification – documents were read to identify any provision, requirement, or resource designed to influence school/teacher behaviour toward policy goals; each instrument was recorded with source, date, and description. Phase 2: Categorisation – instruments were classified using a four-category typology (authoritative, incentive-based, capacity-building, learning-based) based on their primary mechanism of influence; secondary mechanisms were noted. Phase 3: Temporal mapping – instruments were arranged chronologically and divided into three emergent policy phases: 2013–2018 (initial implementation), 2019–2022 (consolidation/expansion), 2023–2025 (digitalisation/quality assurance). Phase 4: Interaction analysis – relationships among co-occurring instruments were examined for complementarity, substitution, or conflict. To enhance rigour, two researchers independently coded a random 20% subset; inter-coder agreement reached 84% initially and 92% after discussion. Detailed coding records were maintained throughout.

4. Results

The analysis reveals a comprehensive and evolving portfolio of policy instruments deployed in British after-school sports services. This section presents the findings according to the four instrument categories, followed by an analysis of evolutionary patterns and instrument interactions.

4.1. Authoritative Instruments

Authoritative instruments constitute a significant component of the British policy portfolio, establishing the legal and regulatory framework within which other instruments operate. These instruments rely on government's legitimate authority to mandate, require, or prohibit specific actions.

Conditions of Grant for the PE and Sport Premium. The most fundamental authoritative instrument is the annual Conditions of Grant document, which specifies the legal requirements attached to the receipt of PE and Sport Premium funding ^[7] ^[16] ^[17] ^[18]. These conditions have become progressively more detailed over time. The initial framework (2013-2015) contained relatively broad requirements focused on improving the quality and breadth of physical education and sport. By the 2025-2026 conditions, the document had expanded to include specific requirements for expenditure reporting, online publication, and the involvement of governing bodies in oversight.

Mandatory Online Reporting Requirement. Since 2014, schools have been required to publish details of their PE and Sport Premium spending on their websites. This requirement, codified in the conditions of grant, mandates that schools disclose the amount of funding received, how it has been spent, and the impact achieved. The 2025 guidance further specifies that this information must be published by 31 July each year and retained for at least three years. Digital Expenditure Reporting Return: a significant recent addition is the Digital Expenditure Reporting Return, mandated from July 2025 ^[18]. This instrument requires schools to submit standardised expenditure data through an online portal, transforming what was previously a self-directed transparency obligation into a formal, auditable reporting requirement. Ofsted Inspection Framework: the Ofsted school inspection framework constitutes an indirect but powerful authoritative instrument. The framework includes evaluation of how schools use the PE and Sport

Premium and the quality of physical education and sports provision more broadly ^[20] ^[9]. Schools judged as inadequate in this domain may face consequences for their overall inspection rating, creating significant accountability pressure. Safeguarding Guidance for After-School Clubs: the statutory safeguarding guidance for schools explicitly covers after-school clubs and extracurricular activities ^[19]. While this guidance is non-statutory in a strict legal sense, it is treated as mandatory by schools and inspection bodies, functioning as a de facto authoritative instrument. National Standards for Coaching Qualifications: although not legally binding in all contexts, the expectation that external coaches working in schools hold minimum qualifications and safeguarding certifications operates as an authoritative standard, enforced through school policies and Ofsted expectations.

4.2. Incentive-Based Instrument

Incentive-based instruments provide material resources to encourage desired behaviours. The British portfolio relies heavily on dedicated, ring-fenced funding as the primary incentive mechanism. PE and Sport Premium: the central incentive-based instrument is the PE and Sport Premium itself. Introduced in 2013, this provides annual dedicated funding to all state-funded primary schools ^[7]. The funding is ring-fenced, meaning it cannot be absorbed into general school budgets for other purposes. The scale has grown from approximately £150 million annually in the early years to over £320 million by 2025, representing a significant material incentive for schools to prioritise physical education and sport. School Sport and Activity Action Plan Funding: the 2019 School Sport and Activity Action Plan included a £2.5 million fund specifically to support innovation and expansion in after-school sports provision ^[8]. This supplement to the core Premium funding targeted particular priorities, including increasing participation among less active groups. New After-School Satellite Clubs Programme: a focused incentive instrument is the programme supporting the creation of 400 new after-school satellite clubs across England ^[21]. This project-based funding incentivises schools and community organisations to establish structured, ongoing extracurricular provision in areas of identified need. Youth Services Funding Package: the broader youth services funding context provides additional incentive instruments relevant to after-school sports. The £88 million youth services funding package announced in 2025 includes components explicitly supporting sports and physical activity ^[22]. Tailored Extracurricular Activity Fund: a more targeted incentive instrument is the £22.5 million fund providing three years of support to 400 schools to develop customised extracurricular activity programmes ^[23]. This instrument's extended timeframe (three rather than one year) enables more sustained programme development. Better Youth Spaces Capital Fund: the £30.5 million capital fund for youth spaces supports infrastructure improvements relevant to after-school sports, including facilities and equipment ^[24].

4.3. Capacity-Building Instruments

Capacity-building instruments aim to enhance the knowledge, skills, and resources available to schools and other actors, enabling them to deliver high-quality provision. Teacher Continuing Professional Development: the conditions of the PE and Sport Premium explicitly identify teacher professional development as an appropriate use of funding ^[23]. This has supported substantial investment in training, particularly for non-specialist primary teachers who lack confidence in delivering physical education. Youth Sport Trust Professional Toolkit: the Youth Sport Trust has developed a comprehensive toolkit providing guidance, templates, and resources organised around the five key indicators for effective PE and sport ^[25]. This capacity-building resource supports schools in planning, implementing, and evaluating their provision. Association for Physical Education Monitoring Templates: the Association for Physical Education (afPE) has developed standardised templates for monitoring and tracking the use and impact of the PE and Sport Premium. These instruments build schools' capacity for systematic self-evaluation. Regional Pilot Programmes: the Department for Education has supported regional pilot programmes to test and develop innovative approaches to after-school sports delivery. These pilots generate learning that can be disseminated and adopted more widely. Headteacher and Governor Guidance: joint guidance from the Department for Education and the Local Government Association provides specific resources for school leaders and governors responsible for overseeing the PE and Sport Premium. This capacity-building instrument targets the governance rather than the delivery level ^[26]. Safeguarding Training Requirements: while authoritative in effect, the requirement that staff and volunteers involved in after-school activities complete safeguarding training also functions as a capacity-building instrument, enhancing the knowledge and skills of personnel.

4.4. Learning-Based Instruments

Learning-based instruments create conditions for ongoing reflection, adaptation, and improvement based on evidence and experience. Active Lives Children and Young People Survey: the Sport England's Active Lives survey provides systematic, high-quality data on participation patterns, attitudes, and outcomes [27]. This instrument creates a shared evidence base for policy learning at both national and local levels. Ofsted Thematic Reviews: the Ofsted has conducted thematic reviews examining specific aspects of physical education and sport, including the implementation and impact of the PE and Sport Premium [9] [19]. These reviews generate qualitative and quantitative findings that inform policy refinement. Education Endowment Foundation Research: the EEF has funded and conducted research on physical education and physical activity interventions, providing evidence on what works [28]. This learning instrument translates rigorous research into accessible guidance for schools. School Games Competition Framework: the School Games provides a national competition structure that generates participation data and creates feedback loops between participation and performance. Schools and local organisers use this data to identify gaps in provision and adjust their programmes. Case Study Libraries: the Department for Education maintains a library of case studies showcasing effective practice in PE and the Sport Premium use [17] [29]. These serve as learning instruments by enabling peer-to-peer dissemination of promising approaches. Professional Networks and Communities of Practice: organisations including the Youth Sport Trust and local sport partnerships facilitate networks where PE coordinators and headteachers share experiences, discuss challenges, and learn from one another [25]. These relational learning mechanisms complement formal, document-based instruments.

4.5. Temporal Evolution of Instrument Portfolios

The British instrument portfolio evolved through three phases. Phase 1 (2013–2018) was an incentive-heavy, light-touch accountability model: the PE and Sport Premium dominated, with basic reporting requirements, minimal capacity-building (general guidance only), and almost no learning instruments. Evaluation revealed limitations: variable spending quality, weak impact measurement, and gaps for less active groups. Phase 2 (2019–2022) saw significant expansion in response to evidence: authoritative instruments were strengthened (detailed grant conditions, governing body oversight); capacity-building grew substantially (five key indicators, toolkits, targeted guidance); and learning instruments emerged (Active Lives survey, Ofsted reviews). This balanced portfolio recognised that funding alone is insufficient without knowledge, skills, and feedback. Phase 3 (2023–2025) brings further refinement with more intensive authoritative instruments (e.g., digital expenditure reporting), though details are cut short in the original excerpt. The Digital Expenditure Reporting Return (2025)^[22] represents a significant escalation in accountability, moving from self-directed publication to standardised, auditable data submission. Capacity-building instruments have become more targeted, focusing on specific challenges such as engaging disadvantaged pupils and girls. Learning-based instruments have matured, with longitudinal data enabling trend analysis and more sophisticated evaluation of impact. The emerging portfolio can be characterised as a digital accountability, evidence-informed model. The theory of change now explicitly incorporates data quality and standardisation as preconditions for effective oversight and improvement. The key features of each phase are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Summarises the evolution of instrument portfolios across the three phases.

Instrument Category	Phase 1 (2013-2018)	Phase 2 (2019-2022)	Phase 3 (2023-2025)
Authoritative	Basic online reporting; broad conditions	Strengthened conditions; governor oversight	Digital expenditure return; detailed standards
Incentive-based	PE and Sport Premium only	Premium plus action plan funding	Premium plus targeted funds
Capacity-building	General guidance only	Five key indicators; toolkits; leadership guidance	Targeted CPD; governance resources
Learning-based	Minimal; no systematic evaluation	Active Lives survey; Ofsted reviews; EEF research	Longitudinal data; case studies; networks
Dominant Logic	Incentive-heavy, light-touch accountability	Balanced portfolio with capability building	Digital accountability, evidence-informed

The British instrument portfolio exhibits several productive complementarities. Funding plus transparency: incentive-based funding (PE and Sport Premium) pairs with mandatory reporting, ensuring resources are visibly accounted for. Accountability plus capability: authoritative inspection expectations (Ofsted) are matched with capacity-building toolkits and guidance, so pressure for improvement is accompanied by means to respond. Data plus learning: learning instruments (Active Lives survey, Ofsted reviews) combine with capacity-building resources (case studies, toolkits) to enable evidence-informed improvement. National frameworks plus local adaptation: standardised requirements (grant conditions, reporting formats) coexist with flexible resources that schools can adapt locally. This balance between consistency and flexibility is intentional. Evidence of substitution or conflict is limited—evolution has been predominantly additive, layering new instruments onto existing ones. Overt conflict is rare, though some tension exists: multiple reporting requirements create administrative burden, and the balance between central accountability and professional autonomy remains under negotiation.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal a sophisticated and evolving portfolio of policy instruments for after-school sports services in Britain. This section discusses the theoretical implications of these findings, compares the British approach with alternative models, and considers the practical lessons for other countries.

5.1. Theoretical Implications: Instrument Evolution as Layered Learning

The British case supports theoretical accounts of policy instrument evolution as a process of layered learning, where new instruments are added to address gaps while existing ones remain, resulting in an increasingly dense and differentiated portfolio—consistent with institutional layering. The initial incentive-heavy mix (Phase 1) faced limitations such as uneven spending quality and weak impact measurement, but rather than abandoning funding instruments, authoritative and learning-based tools were added, improving effectiveness without discarding core components. The evolution also reveals two learning logics: instrumental learning (Phase 1→2), which refines means to achieve stable goals, and paradigmatic learning (Phase 2→3), where digital expenditure reporting shifts from trust-based to data-verification accountability, altering government–school relations. Finally, the move from a simple, incentive-heavy portfolio to a complex, multi-instrument one reflects a broader shift from hierarchical to networked governance, with government acting as orchestrator of a distributed delivery system requiring more sophisticated coordination mechanisms.

5.2. Comparative Perspective: The British Model in International Context

While systematic cross-national comparison is beyond this study's scope, positioning the British approach relative to alternatives highlights its distinctive features. The British model contrasts with the direct provision model in some continental European countries, where state-employed personnel deliver services within an integrated school framework and authoritative instruments (central regulation, standardisation) dominate. It also contrasts with the market-based model in other Anglo-Saxon countries like the US, where private, fee-charging organisations provide services with minimal government involvement, and capacity-building occurs through market competition rather than coordinated development. The British model occupies an intermediate position: it uses government funding and accountability to shape a diverse delivery landscape, rather than providing directly or leaving entirely to the market. Its distinctiveness lies in institutionalised complementarity across incentive-based, authoritative, capacity-building, and learning instruments. This coherence—where each instrument reinforces the others—reflects intentional policy design refined through iterative adjustment, not a fully realised blueprint from the outset.

5.3. Practical Lessons for Policy Design

The British experience offers four practical lessons for countries developing after-school sports policies. First, funding alone is insufficient; incentives must be paired with authoritative, capacity-building, and learning instruments to improve quality sustainably. Second, accountability should be proportionate to capacity—Britain moved from light-touch to intensive accountability (e.g., Digital Expenditure Reporting Return in 2025) only after schools had developed basic compliance skills and were given supporting resources. Third, learning instruments (e.g., Active Lives survey, Ofsted reviews, EEF research) are essential for adaptive management, providing the evidence base for ongoing

refinement. Fourth, instrument mixes must balance national consistency (standardised requirements) with local flexibility (context-sensitive implementation), recognising that effective provision adapts to local settings while accountability demands comparability.

5.4. Limitations and Caveats

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies on documentary evidence, capturing policy intent and formal design rather than actual implementation by frontline actors. Second, the focus on government-chosen instruments may underplay bottom-up instruments developed by non-governmental actors (professional bodies, sports organisations, schools). Third, the study does not systematically evaluate effectiveness; while it identifies desirable properties like complementarity and coherence, it does not demonstrate causal links to better outcomes for children. Fourth, the British case is context-specific, so direct instrument transfer may be inappropriate—design must be sensitive to local administrative capacity, institutions, and norms. The value lies in illuminating principles, not providing a template for direct copying.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the evolution of policy instruments for British after-school sports services (2013–2025) using policy instrument theory. Four instrument categories were identified: authoritative (regulations, accountability), incentive-based (funding, grants), capacity-building (professional development, toolkits), and learning-based (data monitoring, pilots, networks). The evolution followed three phases: 2013–2018 (incentive-dominated, weak accountability), 2019–2022 (portfolio expansion with stronger authoritative and capacity-building tools, emergence of learning-based instruments), and 2023–2025 (digitalisation and quality assurance, notably digital expenditure reporting). The British portfolio shows high complementarity: funding pairs with transparency, accountability matches capacity-building, data informs guidance, and national standards allow local flexibility. Theoretically, the study extends policy instrument theory to an underexplored domain and provides evidence for layered learning (additive evolution, not wholesale replacement). Practically, it offers insights for other countries (e.g., China under the Double Reduction policy): effective portfolios require coherent combinations of accountability, capability-building, and learning instruments, calibrated to local capacity and refined iteratively. Future research should pursue cross-national comparisons, implementation studies, longitudinal outcome analysis, and extension to related policy domains such as arts education.

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