

**Analysing policy change and continuity:**

**Physical education and school sport policy in England since 2010**

**Author:**

Iain Lindsey (Durham University)

**Address for Correspondence:**

Dr Iain Lindsey

School of Applied Social Sciences

Durham University

42 Old Elvet

Durham University

DH1 3HN

Email: [iain.lindsey@durham.ac.uk](mailto:iain.lindsey@durham.ac.uk)

Tel: 0191 334 6988

## **Abstract**

Prominent developments in English PE and school sport (PESS) policy across the period of Conservative-led governments since 2010 have not been empirically or comprehensively researched. In addressing this shortcoming, this study was uniquely underpinned by punctuated equilibrium theory in order to respond to long-standing difficulties of differentiating and explaining both policy change *and* continuity. Application of this theory benefited from the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data from ten elite interviewees, policy documents and searches of broadsheet newspapers and parliamentary records across a 15-year period. Overall, the ring-fencing of significant funding for PESS since 2013 indicates that successive Conservative-led governments maintained and further embedded the enhanced status of PESS that had initially emerged in the 1990s. On the other hand, significant modifications in PESS policy increasingly aligned it with health-related objectives and were implemented through a decentralised model that differed significantly from the standardised, top-down approach enacted by preceding Labour governments. It is argued that these policy changes represent a ‘policy punctuation’ which occurred across 2010 and 2013 when the attention of cabinet ministers was drawn to PESS as a result of a confluence of external events and dramatic spikes in wider media and political interest. Subsequently, a reconstituted but expanded coalition of key PESS policy actors has supported the reestablishment of ‘equilibrium’ and continuity in PESS policy. These findings demonstrate the broader importance of distinguishing the continuation of a relatively high status for PESS from the intermittent salience that it has at the highest levels of government. In-depth explanation of both a rare policy ‘window’ for PESS policy change and long-standing institutionalisation of policy continuity was also significantly enhanced by the utilisation of punctuated equilibrium theory, demonstrating its distinctive value for future studies of PESS and sport policy.

**Keywords:** PESS, Conservative Government, Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, Austerity,  
Michael Gove

## Introduction

There is an urgent need to reinvigorate theoretically-informed and empirically-based analysis of physical education and school sport (PESS) policy. Empirically, this article addresses the absence of detailed analysis of prominent policy decisions for PESS in England taken by successive Coalition and Conservative governments since May 2010. This contemporary research gap stands in contrast to the numerous studies of PESS policy undertaken across the course of the preceding Labour governments from 1997 to 2010. Much of this earlier research had Houlihan and Green's (2006, p74) ground-breaking article on 'the changing status of school sport and physical education' as a common point of departure. Theirs was the first substantial investigation of the 'dramatic change in the political salience' and status of PESS as it became closely linked to a broad array of Labour's wider policy goals in the late-1990s (*ibid.*, p.74). Further studies also pointed to the increased status of PESS being politically justified through its potential contributions across young people's social development, educational attainment, social inclusion, and, slightly less prominently, health (e.g. Flintoff, 2003; Jung et al., 2016).

Following Houlihan and Green's article, subsequent studies also analysed Labour's developing implementation of PESS policy. Philpotts' study (2013) identified the 2003 publication of the PE, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy (DfES/DCMS, 2003) as signifying the emergence and institutionalisation of Labour's overarching implementation approach. The strategy heralded the beginning of substantial increases in government funding for PESS (see, subsequently, Figure 2), much of this being channelled through increasing numbers of School Sport Partnerships (SSPs) across the whole of England. Consisting of clusters of secondary and primary schools, SSPs were identified as becoming the key

universal and standardised organisational model for implementation of Labour's PESS policy (Flintoff, 2008; Phillpots, 2013). The PESSCL strategy also marked the first specification of a national target for pupils' participation in PESS, and shortly afterwards an associated system for measuring PESS provision and participation was established with the advent of a new national School Sport Survey (Smith and Leech, 2010). While there were subsequent minor changes to aspects of this implementation approach, the common consensus amongst researchers of the period was that Labour's 'modernised' implementation system represented a centralised, top-down form of governance for PESS (Jung et al., 2015; Phillpots and Grix, 2014; Smith and Leech, 2010).

Theoretically, Houlihan and Green's (2006) study also significantly advanced the use and application of policy analysis theories to PESS, as well as to sport more generally. While earlier important studies of PESS policy had drawn on sociological theories (e.g. Evans and Penney, 1995; Kirk, 1992), the originality of Houlihan and Green's (2006) PESS research at the time was in its application and comparison of two meso-level theories of the policy process, namely the Advocacy Coalition and Multiple Streams Frameworks. They found developments in PESS at the time to be particularly well-aligned with Multiple Stream's differentiation of: a *problem stream*, in which different problems connected to PESS were widely recognised; a *policy stream*, in which feasible proposals for PESS policy change were available; and a *politics stream*, in which individuals at the highest level of government were increasingly 'receptive' towards new ideas for PESS (Houlihan and Green, 2006).

Significantly, Houlihan and Green's (2006) empirical data also demonstrated how Sue Campbell, then chair of the Youth Sport Trust, fulfilled the key role of a 'policy entrepreneur' in connecting developments across the multiple streams, thereby creating timely conditions and a 'policy window' for significant PESS policy change.

Among various sport policy research that followed Houlihan and Green (2006) in utilising either the Multiple Streams and Advocacy Coalition Frameworks (e.g. Kristiansen and Houlihan, 2017; Piggin and Hart, 2017, Sotiriadou and Brouwers, 2012), two specific studies applied the latter theory to PESS policy in England. Both Philpotts' (2013) and Zehndorfer and Mackintosh's (2013) studies have, however, encountered problems in their application of this theory especially in respect to what they respectively identified as 'major' and 'extensive' policy changes. Philpotts (2013, p.201) explains that the 'rise' of SSPs came about in part, as a result of 'policy-oriented learning' by an increasingly 'dominant coalition of policy actors' consisting of the Department for Education and Skills, Department of Culture, Media and Sport, and the Youth Sport Trust. While these were important insights, both policy learning and the institutionalisation of advocacy coalitions are aspects of the Advocacy Coalition Framework that are associated with continuous and incremental processes of policy development and, as such, there is a discrepancy with Philpotts' claim to explain 'major policy change' (2013, p.193). Zehndorfer and Mackintosh's (2013) subsequent application of Advocacy Coalition Framework in their early analysis of the Coalition government decision to cut SSP funding in 2010 lacked the empirical grounding of Philpott's (2013) research. However, their use of Advocacy Coalition Framework shared similar problems in distinguishing and accounting for policy change as they appear to argue that alterations to the dominant advocacy coalition were both a cause and a consequence of the PESS policy change initiated by the Coalition government.

Consequently, both theoretical and empirical limitations of PESS policy analysis alluded to at the outset of this article are apparent. There have been some empirical studies of the consequences of the PESS policies enacted by the Coalition and Conservative governments in

England since 2010 (e.g. Griggs, 2016; Jones and Green, 2017). However, the absence of any studies that use primary data to trace the evolution and processes of PESS policy development across this period significantly weakens overarching understanding of the PESS field. Limitations of the only two policy analysis theories to have been substantially applied to PESS policy also suggest that different approaches may be required to address Penney's (2017, p.570) pertinent affirmation that 'policy analyses must attend to both the changes and continuities evident amidst ongoing policy developments impacting physical education'. Houlihan and Green (2006, p.89) found the Multiple Streams Framework to offer the 'more plausible explanation' of significant PESS policy change, but this theory is inherently limited in explaining policy continuity (Cairney, 2012). On the other hand, Philpotts' (2013) and Zehndorfer and Mackintosh's (2013) applications of the Advocacy Coalition Framework struggled to explain and differentiate between processes associated with either rapid or more continuous, incremental policy change.

The need to address these specific limitations led to the choice of punctuated equilibrium theory to underpin the research presented in this article. The theory was specifically developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) because of their frustration with existing theories that focused on either policy continuity or change. While punctuated equilibrium theory has justifiably become 'one of the most ... influential paradigms in the field of policy studies' (Prindle, 2012, p.36), it remains surprising that Richie and Jackson's (2014) study of anti-doping is the only exemplar of its application to any aspect of sport policy. Therefore, this article addresses a twofold purpose: (i) to advance understanding of PESS policy decisions and processes across the period of Coalition and Conservative governments since 2010; and (ii) to explore the potential value of punctuated equilibrium theory towards differentiated analysis of policy change and continuity within PESS and across sport policy

more broadly. It is to further explanation of punctuated equilibrium theory that the article now turns.

### **Punctuated Equilibrium Theory**

Over time, punctuated equilibrium theory has been developed and applied through studies of a range of diverse policy issues in various country contexts (Boushey, 2013), including the UK (see, for example, Jennings et al., 2017; John and Jennings, 2010). Initial development of the theory occurred in the United States where Baumgartner and Jones (1993) found common historical patterns across different policy issues whereby extended periods of relative stability (or 'equilibrium') were irregularly 'punctuated' by transitions during which policy changed rapidly. In developing their theoretical explanation of these patterns of policy continuity and change, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) distinctively adapted the concept of 'bounded rationality' that had previously been central to incremental theories of the policy process. Bounded rationality indicates that, in light of being continuously 'bombarded with diverse information from many different sources' (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012, p.7), policy makers are constrained and make decisions based on selective interpretation rather than comprehensive analysis. An ensuing key insight underpinning punctuated equilibrium theory is that high-level politicians and policy makers consequently have very limited capacity to give attention to multiple policy issues concurrently (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012).

Therefore, within a particular policy sector (such as PESS), punctuated equilibrium theory suggests that there will be periods of relative stability during which leading politicians will accord their attention to other more pressing issues. At such times, continuity within the policy sector is represented by the predominance of a particular 'policy image' – that is, 'the



manner in which a policy is characterised or understood' (True, Jones and Baumgartner, 2007, p.176). Ongoing policy decisions congruent with this policy image become delegated to a specific and exclusive 'policy subsystem' consisting of elected officials, civil servants, particular interest group representatives and other experts (Boushley, 2013). This delegation of responsibility to subsystems also and concurrently occurs across different policy sectors, so that collectively 'parallel processing' of information and decision making can occur across the full spectrum of governmental responsibilities (True, Jones and Baumgartner, 2007).

Once established, a policy subsystem would seek to maintain its status as the primary 'institutional venue' with responsibility for ongoing policy decisions in its sector. Responses to new information or emergent problems consist of relatively minor and incremental 'countervailing actions' (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012) which may serve to demonstrate a degree of policy responsiveness but also preserve the monopoly position of the policy subsystem (Boushley, 2013). Jones and Baumgartner (2013) thus characterise policy making in such periods as being subject to a negative feedback cycle through which the cognitive frame of a predominant policy image and the institutional arrangements within the policy subsystem act as 'friction', limiting the extent to which external societal or political influences can prompt policy change.

Conversely, at particular times, a 'focusing event' can lead to positive feedback cycles that result in policy change of greater magnitude (Baumgartner, 2013). Unexpected crises, compelling changes in indicators associated with existing policy, and elections or changes of government can all serve as focusing events. At such times, a particular policy issue would gain widespread attention from politicians across party or ideological divides, from different interest groups and from the general public, all buoyed by significant media coverage

(Boushey, 2013). This prominence results in the policy issue becoming temporarily subject to ‘serial processing’ whereby it becomes one of the small number of policy issues that, at any particular time, receive significant attention from senior political decision makers (True, Jones and Baumgartner, 2007).

Gaining widespread attention and being subject to serial processing means that, for a period, policy making processes may open up to stakeholders who previously were outside of the dominant policy subsystem. Institutional venues for decision making can change, competing policy ideas and images may be advocated (True, Jones and Baumgartner, 2007).

Nevertheless, policy makers’ capacity to consider all relevant information remains bounded. Significant policy changes during such ‘punctuations’ may still, therefore, be shaped by partisan preferences and predominant ideologies or remain focused on particular aspects of a policy problem (Boushey, 2013). Moreover, significant levels of political, public and media attention and particular policy making dynamics during punctuations cannot be maintained. As attention recedes, policy making returns to the more stable ‘equilibrium’ of parallel processing, albeit with a potentially new or altered policy subsystem in place and a modified policy image shaping their ongoing and incremental decisions (True, Jones and Baumgartner, 2007).

## **Research Design and Methods**

Both punctuated equilibrium theory and Houlihan and Green's (2006) qualitative investigation of earlier PESS policy developments shaped the mixed-method research design and specific data collection explained in Table 1. First, systematic searches of parliamentary debates and broadsheet newspapers across the period 2003-2016 were undertaken. This

method mirrored previous punctuated equilibrium research (Jennings et al., 2017; John and Jennings, 2010) through providing quantitative and longitudinal measures of political and media attention towards PESS. Second, following Houlihan and Green (2006), qualitative data was obtained from ten elite stakeholder interviews and interrogation of PESS policy documents in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of PESS policy since 2010. Informed by punctuated equilibrium theory and preceding research on PESS, elite interviews specifically obtained key actors' understandings of PESS policy processes that would otherwise have been inaccessible (Lilleker, 2003).

**[Table 1 Include here]**

Analysis of qualitative data from interviews, documents, parliamentary debates and newspapers drew on Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) 'hybrid approach' to thematic analysis through a three-stage process. The first stage followed from preceding collation of quantitative data which identified two specific 'peaks' of political and media attention in 2010 and 2012-13, each of which were closely linked to specific changes in PESS funding. Qualitative data extracts were, therefore, initially divided according to their relevance to either of the two time periods that led up to and encompassed these changes in attention and funding or else to the third, subsequent period that ran through to 2017. The second stage of deductive analysis was then theoretically-driven (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Hall's (1993) seminal differentiation of three 'orders' of policy change (see Table 2) provided primary thematic codes allocated to all data extracts relating to PESS policy objectives and implementation approaches. This analytic approach, recommended by both Houlihan (2014) and Baumgartner (2013), was specifically adopted to address the challenge of distinguishing policy change and continuity. Otherwise, components of punctuated equilibrium theory also

served as primary thematic codes for those data extracts that concerned factors affecting PESS policy. Finally, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) recommendation for a further complete round of inductive analysis enabled the allocation of secondary sub-codes that further clustered all data extracts within each of the primary themes.

**[Table 2 Include here]**

## **Research Findings**

The distinct periods of PESS policy making that were identified through the analysis provided the structure for the following presentation of research findings. Thus, three subsections collectively cover developments from 2010 to 2017, beginning with early PESS policy changes following the election of the Conservative-led, Coalition government in May 2010.

### ***Late 2010: the dismantling of Labour's PESS policy paradigm***

The Coalition government announced its first important PESS policy decision six months after coming to power, heralding the end of Labour's approach to PESS implementation and also sparking a significant political and public reaction. On 20<sup>th</sup> October 2010, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, communicated two related but distinctive changes to PESS policy in a public letter to Sue Campbell, Chair of the Youth Sport Trust. First, Gove announced the discontinuation of ring-fenced funding that had previously been designated for PESS by successive Labour governments. In justifying this cut, SSPs in particular were described as not 'affordable' (Gove, 2010, p.2) when deep cuts across many areas of public spending, if not education, were also announced on the same day (House of Commons

Library, 2010). The full scale of this cut had not been anticipated even by interviewees closely involved in PESS policy and so the dramatic nature of the announcement was widely interpreted as a significant de-prioritisation of PESS by the new government. Second, Gove's letter announced a PESS policy implementation 'approach [which] differs fundamentally from that of the last Government' (Gove, 2010, p.2). In line with the Coalition government's ideological commitment towards decentralisation across the education system (Ball, 2012), national targets for PESS, the School Sport Survey that measured them and other nationally-specified initiatives for schools were discontinued. Removing all of the policy instruments by which the preceding Labour government steered PESS implementation left individual schools to decide on their own approaches to PESS, including the 'freedom' to determine whether and how to continue with SSPs (Gove, 2010, p.3).

While Gove's PESS announcement had the dramatic nature of a policy punctuation, the context and reasoning given for the decision differed from explanations of significant policy change suggested by punctuated equilibrium theory. Arguments that the preceding system of SSPs was ineffective and inefficient, especially in developing competitive school sport, were made in Gove's letter and also, notably, by Prime Minister David Cameron who claimed that Labour's PESS 'approach did not work and it is time for a new one' (HC Deb, 24 November 2010, c258). Subsequent reports do indicate a small number of PESS stakeholders voicing concerns regarding the bureaucracy of SSPs (HoCL, 2012; HoCEC, 2013a) and one external interviewee likewise spoke of there being 'so much money that many of the primary teachers managed to extricate themselves from teaching PE'. However, as subsequent parliamentary hearings indicated (HoCEC, 2013a), most PESS stakeholders held a substantially different position regarding the effectiveness of SSPs and evidence from the School Sport Survey that showed increasing participation rates was widely cited to counter the government's stance

(Houlihan, 2010; Phillpots, 2013). There was not, therefore, the accumulating evidence or growing consensus against Labour's PESS policies that would normally be the case preceding a policy punctuation (Boushey, 2013). Instead, some interviewees pointed to personal, ideological and political motives as being the key drivers of Gove's decision to cut PESS funding.

What is clear is that the decision reflected a change in the institutional venues central to PESS policy making and also began a reconfiguration of relationships in the PESS policy subsystem – both common features of policy punctuations. The lack of specific consultation with Sue Campbell and the YST in advance of the decision represented a rapid reversal of their previously central position in PESS policy development (Phillpots, 2013). Instead, as different interviewees recounted, the YST found themselves without well-established relationships with newly influential Conservative politicians, who equally viewed Campbell as being personally aligned with the preceding Labour government. While the Association for Physical Education's (AfPE) response to the PESS funding cut was deliberately neutral, the YST's position was complicated given that a significant proportion of their own revenue was affected. During a '63-day campaign' that was started to preserve PESS funding, the YST therefore had to tread a:

*real fine line on that campaigning voice ... trying to drive up as much interest in the subject as possible in a way that kept the debate alive and public, but equally working so that politicians, ministers and civil servants continued to recognise the YST as a reputable, trusted and important organisation to work with* (Ex-Senior Official, Partner Organisation)

The influence of the ‘campaign’ was significant in what appears as a reversing of the conventional sequencing of policy punctuations in which policy change normally comes as a result of a ‘focusing event’ drawing political and media attention. Instead, it was Gove’s announcement that prompted the media and politicians, including those at the highest level of government, to direct their attention towards the issue of PESS. Opposition to the funding cut received prominent media coverage with broadsheet newspapers publishing 61 articles on PESS in the two month period following Gove’s announcement, more than in any full year from 2003 to 2009. Quantitative analysis of parliamentary records also demonstrates that the policy change in 2010 prompted an even greater spike in attention towards PESS amongst politicians (see Figure 1). Most notably, the funding cut was raised at Prime Minister’s Question Time by Ed Miliband, Labour’s Leader of the Opposition, thereby requiring David Cameron to make his own defence of the decision. While this instance was reflective of a party political dimension to parliamentary debates, concern with the funding cut was not the sole preserve of those in the Labour party who made 64% of the interventions in parliament. Disagreements within the Cabinet itself were reported in different newspaper reports (Helm and Asthana 2010; Paton, 2010), with Jeremy Hunt, then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, also being identified by interviewees as a central figure who enjoined others, such as Andrew Lansley (Secretary of State for Health), to express concern with the scale of the funding cut.

**[Figure 1 Insert here]**

On 21<sup>st</sup> December 2010, a further policy statement from the Department of Education (DoE, 2010) signified that agreement had been reached in the Cabinet. Instead of the full immediate cut to SSPs, ring-fenced funding from DoE was tapered over the following 2½ years and

Jeremy Hunt also secured additional moneys from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Department of Health and Sport England Lottery budgets (see Figure 2) to retain some SSP personnel as ‘School Games Organisers’. Echoing punctuated equilibrium theory, governmental and external interviewees concurred that the government’s purpose in providing some replacement funding was to ‘calm and quieten down the media interest’, without having to alter Gove’s broader objective of decentralised policy implementation. His departmental statement continued to emphasise that PESS was to be ‘led by schools and parents, not by top-down policies from Whitehall’ (DoE, 2010), an ongoing commitment which stands in contrast to previous characterisations of Gove making a ‘significant and swift climb down’ in response to the 63-day campaign (Zehndorfer and Mackintosh, 2014, p.156). Other prominent aspects of the Coalition government’s PESS policy also represented a greater degree of continuity than previous research suggests (Phillpots, 2013). The importance placed on competitive sport both in Gove’s letter and the subsequent policy statement mirrored the preceding Labour government’s similar prioritisation, as signified by their instigation of the UK School Games in 2006 (Jung et al., 2016). Moreover, the Conservative’s own version of the School Games had earlier been announced as a flagship DCMS programme, thus providing the context for Hunt’s successful efforts to retain funding to deliver on that commitment in advance of hosting the 2012 Olympic Games.

**[Figure 2 Include here] <sup>1</sup>**

### ***Towards the London 2012 Olympics and the PE and Sport Premium***

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<sup>1</sup> The funding amounts presented in figure 2 were identified from written parliamentary answers and a specific response provided by one of government policy advisors who was interviewed for this study.



It was ultimately the attention to PESS that came as a result of hosting of the 2012 Olympics which led to the next significant policy development, namely the funding of a new PE and Sport Premium. However, immediately after the intense policy activity of late 2010, there was little sign of any re-established, post-punctuation policy equilibrium for PESS. Different interviewees described the period through 2011 and early 2012 as being ‘disrupted and fragmented’, ‘depressing’ and affected by ‘a bit of confusion really’ regarding the direction of PESS policy. The lack of a co-ordinated government approach was symbolised by the DCMS publishing their own ‘New Youth Sport Strategy’ in January 2012 which, without explicit input from the DoE, provided little impetus for PESS other than restating existing School Games planning. With the YST also focused on adapting to dramatically reduced funding and changes to the network of school staff it oversaw, the sub-system coalition that dominated PESS policy making over the period of the Labour governments was no more.

**[Figure 3: Insert here]**

Nevertheless, within the PESS sector, there remained a sense that the ‘government hadn’t necessarily answered the questions that were all raised back in 2010’ (Ex-Senior Official, Partner Organisation). London’s hosting of the Olympics in August 2012 proved to be the ‘exogenous shock’ (John and Jennings, 2010) that refocused attention towards PESS and opened a window for policy change. Promises regarding the Games’ legacy for young people became central to a dramatic spike in PESS media coverage in 2012 (see Figure 3).

Broadsheet newspapers published 122 articles covering PESS during the month of the Olympics alone. The event also provided an opportunity for prominent individuals including Lord Colin Moynihan and Baroness Sue Campbell (as Chairs of the British Olympics

Association and UK Sport respectively) to revive their advocacy, both in public and private, for PESS. Furthermore, the desire to be associated with the broader successes of the Games ensured that senior ministers, especially David Cameron and Jeremy Hunt, again became engaged in renewed debates about the government's PESS policies.

Although no specific policy announcements immediately followed the Olympics, significant pressure remained on the government to address widely-recognised problems with its existing PESS policy. In the six months after their 2012 summer recess, parliamentarians critically raised the issue of PESS in greater numbers than had been the annual average across the period of Labour government from 2003 to 2009 (see Figure 1). Moreover, an Office for Standards in Education review of PESS in February 2013 directly recommended that:

*the Department for Education considers devising a new national strategy for PE and school sport that builds on the successes of school sport partnerships and enables schools to make a major contribution to the sporting legacy left by the 2012 Olympic Games. (Ofsted, 2013, p.4)*

Ongoing debates within government, however, took some time to resolve. Advocacy for PESS by Jeremy Hunt continued to be significant. Hunt's political position had also been strengthened, and his policy orientation shaped, from September 2012 when he was promoted and took control of a far larger budget as Secretary of State for Health. On the other hand, Michael Gove remained as Secretary of State for Education and political journalists reported his ongoing resistance to any further ring-fencing of PESS funding (Helm, 2012; O'Connor and Savage, 2012). Through the resultant cabinet-level deliberations, it was Gove who, in the words of one knowledgeable interviewee, was 'dragged screaming to agreement. He didn't

want it at all'. Ultimately, a final decision was announced on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2013 in a personal statement from David Cameron (Prime Minister's Office, 2013) – an indication in itself of the high-level engagement with PESS policy at the time. The statement heralded the advent of the PE and Sport Premium, with ring-fenced funding of £150m in each of the subsequent two years coming from existing budgets within the Department for Education (£80m), the Department of Health (£60m) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (£10m) (see Figure 2). This collective commitment allowed the government to quell the problematic media and parliamentary attention to PESS with the government presenting the ring-fencing of funding as 'a unique position in school funding and one which demonstrates the importance we place on PE and sport in schools' (HoCECb, 2013).

Decisions on the purpose and distribution of the PE and Sport Premium also provide valuable insight into policy making processes. Although it represented a change to Labour's previous PESS funding system, the decision to focus the PE and Sport Premium towards primary schools was relatively uncontroversial. There was widespread consensus within and beyond government regarding the need to address limitations of primary PESS provision, and develop skills and engagement with sport and physical activity from a young age (House of Commons Education Committee, 2013; House of Lords, 2013; Ofsted, 2013). More broadly, the initially-stated policy goals for the PE and Sport Premium were vaguely framed which enabled the policy announcement to include statements from government ministers and other sport stakeholders differentially associating it with Olympic legacies, competitive and elite sports development, and health aspirations (10 Downing Street, 2013).

The more contentious aspect of the PE and Sport Premium was devolution of spending decisions to individual primary schools, as each received a specific allocation of funding

averaging at £9000 per annum. This approach, which left the government with little central influence over implementation, was not subject to the same consultation as had been the case with the overall reinstatement of PE and Sport Premium funding, but rather came from an accommodation between different interests within the Cabinet. An external interviewee with close connection to Jeremy Hunt identified that he sought to retain ‘some accountability for that money’ and, as a result, primary schools became required to publish details of their PE and Sport Premium spending on their websites and revisions to Ofsted school inspection guidance subsequently included enhanced assessment of PESS provision. Ultimately, however, implementation of the PE and Sport Premium reflected Gove’s consistent orientation of the Department of Education towards decentralisation such that, as one external interviewee put it, ‘we can’t go back on our education policy decision that head teachers should be empowered to make their [own] decisions’ on PESS provision.

### ***2013 onwards: A return to continuity in PESS policy***

Specific policy developments after March 2013 did not have the dramatic character of those that preceded them, but did continue to indicate government commitment to PESS. Funding for the PE and Sport Premium was initially renewed in autumn 2013 and then, after the 2015 election, extended to 2020 (House of Commons Library, 2016). Further, in his 2016 Budget, then-Chancellor George Osborne made the unusual step to hypothecate future income from a new Soft Drinks Industry Levy (colloquially known as the Sugar Tax) ‘to help children’s health and wellbeing’ and ‘double the amount of funding we dedicate to sport in every primary school’ (HC Deb, 16 March 2016, c959). Although other proposals for spending the Levy were subsequently dropped after the 2017 election, the commitment to double the PE

and Sport Premium to £320m per annum commenced in the 2017/18 school year (HC Deb, 17 July 2017, c564) (see previous Figure 2).

Osborne's budget announcement was also symbolic of, and reinforced, the increasing emphasis given to health-related policy goals for PESS. With the advent of Department of Health funding in 2013 and increasing awareness of the scale of childhood obesity, previous policy rhetoric around competitive sport reduced after the Olympics and the government explicitly recognised that a broader range of physical activities were required to engage all pupils (HoCEC, 2013b; DoE, 2015). Increasingly, government pronouncements on the flagship PE and Sport Premium articulated its purpose as ensuring 'all pupils develop healthy, active lifestyles' (HMG, 2014; DoE, 2015). Competitive sport was still promoted through the School Games, but with only a tenth of the PE and Sport Premium funding and a remit increasingly oriented towards the wider health, social and economic objectives adopted by DCMS and prioritised in the government's new sport strategy (DCMS, 2015). By 2017, interviewees almost universally shared perspectives that 'health is the big focus in town now' and 'it is that health agenda pushing [PESS policy] now, which won't get forgotten'.

Compared to this emergent but distinctive shift in policy goals, there was continuity in the government's decentralised approach to PESS implementation. Modifications to this approach were limited to government providing more detailed specifications over time for schools' use of the PE and Sport Premium funding (DoE, 2014-16). Various external agencies were also endorsed and enjoined by the government to provide guidance, support and accreditation for PESS provision in primary schools (see, for example, <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/PE-sport-premium>; <http://www.afpe.org.uk/physical-education/evidencing-the-impact-guidance-template/>). Analysed in relation to Hall's (1993)

differentiated orders of policy change, these incremental extensions to policy information and advice represented relatively minor alterations to the 'settings' of existing governmental instruments for PESS implementation.

It was not that this overall approach to PESS policy implementation was without criticism. Members of Parliament, including Conservatives (see, for example, HC Deb, 5 December 2013, c355WH; HC Deb, 5 December 2013, c361WH), voiced concerns that the initial announcement of the PE and Sport Premium was not accompanied by a 'commit[ment] to a long-term vision for school sport' (HoCEC, 2013a). Some interviewees expressed similar sentiments, one describing the announcement of the Soft Drinks Industry Levy as representing 'money reappear[ing] in even larger sums, but without any strategic framework against which that money is operating' (Senior Officer, Partner Organisation). Accountability for PE and Sport Premium funding continued to be a central point of debate. Interviewees and other stakeholders (e.g. HOCEC, 2013a) were somewhat divided over whether Ofsted was best placed or had capacity to effectively scrutinise primary schools' use of the PE and Sport Premium. Without any other universal monitoring system (All Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Health Childhood, 2016), concerns regarding variations in provision across primary schools and increasing involvement of external providers in the delivery of PESS were voiced by interviewees and other stakeholders (All Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Health Childhood, 2016; Jones and Green, 2017)

That these dissatisfactions did not result in any significant change in policy can, in part, be explained by media and parliamentary interest in PESS reducing to below long-term average levels (as shown in Figures 1 and 3). As one civil servant put it, 'there's not [been] a spike in terms of something that captures the national public imagination like the Olympic legacy, for

example'. Alternative recommendations for PESS policy published by the House of Commons Education Committee (2013), a House of Lords Select Committee (2013) and the All Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood (2016) were largely rebuffed or avoided by the government. Interviewees perceived the junior education minister with responsibility for PESS, Edward Timpson, to be broadly supportive but limited in influence beyond, as he put it himself, trying to 'keep pushing the issue [of PESS] within government' (HC Deb, 5 December 2013, c373WH). Without any broader stimulus, PESS was not an issue requiring attention by more senior government politicians with one external interviewee characterising the government's position as:

It's almost seen as, "We've taken it seriously, because we've put that level of investment into it. So, now it's over to schools and everyone else to work on it".

Consistent with punctuated equilibrium theory, a remaking of institutional relationships within the policy subsystem, through the instigation of a Ministerial Board for PESS, also reinforced policy continuity after 2013. The Department of Health's funding and increased relevance to PESS policy was reflected in a Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Health and their departmental civil servants being represented on the Board, alongside their equivalents from the DoE and DCMS. The changed status of different non-governmental agencies since 2010 meant that the wider membership of the Board also included Sport England and AfPE alongside the previously predominant YST. Interviewees engaged with the Board commonly perceived it as a 'sounding board', a 'management tool for existing funding' and a forum to enable incremental development of PESS policy implementation. The Ministerial Board's membership and functioning was resonant, therefore, of the institutional 'friction' that reinforces periods of policy equilibrium, with this analysis being reinforced by one external

interviewee whose description of it was as a ‘pacifier’ of external interest groups while the ‘big issues’ in respect of PESS remained in ‘the too difficult box’.

### **Discussion: Punctuated equilibrium theory and PESS policy since 2010**

The research demonstrates that the heightened status of PESS that Houlihan and Green (2006) earlier identified has been maintained and, arguably, further embedded across government through the period 2010-2017. Many in the PESS sector had feared differently when funding was cut in 2010. Nevertheless, doubling of the PE and Sport Premium in 2017/18 reinforced the ongoing ring-fencing of PESS funding which from 2013 was higher, in cash terms at least, than for all but four of Labour’s years in government from 1997 to 2010. The scale of resource through a period of continuing austerity is a telling, if inexact, indicator of the ongoing status and priority of PESS across different governments.

However, the PESS policies that have been pursued by Conservative-led governments from 2010 represent a marked change from those that preceded them. In terms of Hall’s (1993) third (and highest) order changes in policy goals, the clear and increasingly specific alignment of PESS with health-related objectives after the 2012 Olympics is notably different to Labour governments’ earlier pursuit of a broader set of education, social development and inclusion outcomes through PESS. Second order changes in policy instruments are even starker. The commitment of Conservative-led governments to decentralisation across the education system has been reflected in the removal and weakening of policy instruments that were central to Labour’s top-down governance of their universal and standardised PESS system (Phillpots and Grix, 2014). This combination of third and second order reforms can undoubtedly be classified as a significant change in PESS policy. In the associated



terminology of punctuated equilibrium theory, this represents a substantive change in the predominant ‘policy image’ for PESS as would be predicted to occur over the course of a specific ‘punctuation’.

It is therefore important to consider whether this change in PESS policy goals and implementation can be explained through conditions theorised to emerge during policy punctuations. Certainly, heightened media and political attention in 2010 and around the 2012 Olympics elevated PESS to be amongst the limited sets of policy issues that, at those times, required ‘serial processing’ at the highest levels of government. In each instance the Cabinet (or, at least, a subset of Cabinet members) temporarily became the key ‘institutional venue’ where significant decisions, intended to ease publically-prominent concerns about PESS, were determined. While these important features are aligned with punctuated equilibrium theory, there is a particular anomaly in the sequencing of events in 2010 specifically. In this case, media and wider political attention was *prompted by* the decision to cut PESS funding when the theory would suggest that policy punctuations would normally *follow from* such increased attention.

Taking a broader perspective, an alternative and compelling case can be made that governmental attention and policy change *across* the period from 2010 until the establishment of the PE and Sport Premium in 2013 was *collectively* representative of a single punctuation. Carter and Jacob (2014, p.139) provide theoretical support for this interpretation in suggesting a ‘need to revise [punctuated equilibrium] models to allow for long policy windows and extended punctuations’. Certainly, there was no period of institutional equilibrium for PESS between the two ‘peaks’ of political and media attention in 2010 and 2012 across which there was a common focus on Olympic legacy promises for

youth sport. Jeremy Hunt's important role in cross-departmental advocacy and decision making for PESS was another significant connection across this period, such that he was portrayed as a 'saviour' of PESS by more than one external interviewee. Hunt's influence was, therefore, clearly similar to that of a 'policy entrepreneur' who, as Jennings et al. (2017) recognise, can play an important role during policy punctuations.

Explanation of continuity in PESS policy since the announcement of the PE and Sport Premium is also supported by punctuated equilibrium theory. The re-establishment of a newly predominant PESS 'policy image' centred on health goals was aided by the engagement of the Department of Health through the preceding punctuation and their increased funding, alongside that of the DoE and DCMS, collectively added stability to subsequent PESS policy implementation. Punctuated equilibrium theory also suggests that the emergence of a reconfigured policy subsystem is important in re-establishing policy equilibrium, a function that was fulfilled by the new Ministerial Board for PESS. The Board served as the key 'institutional venue' for ongoing policy decisions which, in Hall's (1993) terms, were limited to relatively minor, 'first-order' modifications to the implementation of the PE and Sport Premium. Narrowed scope for policy change was also symbolised by the 2017 decision not to continue with alternative proposals for the use of additional Sugar Levy funds. Overall, this institutionalisation of continuity alleviated any potential need for senior government ministers to return significant attention towards PESS.

## **Conclusions**

Utilisation of punctuated equilibrium theory enabled this study to effectively address the theoretically- and methodologically-orientated difficulties that previous studies have

encountered in differentiating and explaining both change and continuity in PESS policy. Furthermore, combining punctuated equilibrium theory with an analytic approach that utilised Hall's (1993) classification of different orders of policy change has helped to overcome the associated challenge that Houlihan (2014) identified, that of identifying periods of time at which policy changes of different magnitudes occur. Demarcation of specific periods and their associated PESS policy developments since 2010 was particularly enhanced by the collation of longitudinal, quantitative data on funding, media and political attention. This approach mirrored previous punctuated equilibrium research but is unique amongst studies of PESS and sport policy. Gaining qualitative data through elite stakeholder interviews also contributed fundamentally to the in-depth explanation of PESS policy processes presented in this article. That the one previous application of punctuated equilibrium theory to sport policy was limited by utilising qualitative data only (Ritchie and Jackson, 2014) indicates that the combination of access to key interviewees and longitudinal measures of media and political attention may not always be feasible. Therefore, while the value of punctuated equilibrium theory for future research on PESS and sport policy is strongly advocated, methodological challenges of doing so should not be ignored.

The study's empirical findings also serve to reinforce the relevance of aspects of Houlihan and Green's (2006) analysis, but also support qualification of their references to the 'increased salience *and* status' of PESS (p.81, emphasis added). In terms of 'status', the increased commitment to PESS that Houlihan and Green (2006) identified has now continued and has become further institutionalised through different governments and departments. On the other hand, this study has clearly shown that PESS only has intermittent 'salience' amongst the most senior government ministers whose attention has been a prerequisite for determine major PESS policy change. This analysis does also align with Houlihan and

Green's (2006) recognition of the importance of 'policy windows'. While their research identified diverse factors contributing to the emergence of a policy window in the 1990s, subsequent opportunities for policy change were prompted by specific 'events' namely the October 2010 decision to cut PESS funding and hosting the 2012 Olympic Games. These different examples reinforce Houlihan and Green's (2006) insight that policy windows can 'open' at both unpredictable and predictable times and so research that compares triggers for PESS and sport policy changes across different governmental contexts may be particularly valuable in understanding these phenomena. Those in the PESS sector who wish for a new policy direction would otherwise be advised to collectively prepare for whenever any future window for policy change may occur.

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