

Here's the cash to deliver big society

David Cameron plans to give people 'personal budgets' to cut bureaucracy and control their lives, says Isabel Oakeshott

DAVID CAMERON is preparing to show how the big society will change people's lives.

The prime minister hopes he can finally demonstrate to voters what his flagship agenda means by outlining plans to put individuals in charge of how money is spent on the services and amenities they use.

The government hopes its white paper on public service reform will end widespread public confusion over the big society policy devised by Steve Hilton, Cameron's strategy chief. Ministers have struggled to convey Hilton's vision of a society in which individuals play a far more active part in making decisions about their own lives and neighbourhoods.

Under the new proposals, the role of town hall bureaucrats will be scaled back dramatically as individuals are given their own cash budgets to buy services such as care for the elderly and schooling for children with special needs. Parish councils will also be given sweeping powers to take control of local parks, sports facilities, playing fields, traffic and parking restrictions, libraries and facilities for young people.

Ministers are confident that the reforms will work after a number of successful pilot studies. In trials, individuals who use council services such as care for the elderly, educational support for children with special needs, care for long-term health conditions and help for young people with mental health or behavioural problems, were allocated

money to spend on what they needed. Council officials worked out the amount they were entitled to, known as a personal budget, based on the cost of the help they would normally provide in such cases.

Individuals then drew up a list of the help they would like, with unprecedented freedom over the type of services they could request. Some of those with physical or mental disabilities chose to spend their money in unusual ways while others used their budgets for more traditional support, such as employing a personal assistant.

In one case an 18-year-old boy with learning difficulties used some of his individual budget to rent an allotment, which he tends with a personal assistant. Council officials approved the request because gardening was deemed therapeutic for him.

The charity In Control, which ran the pilot scheme in which the teenager took part, said on its website: "They spend happy hours there digging and tending to vegetables. The new skills [he] is developing from his time at the allotment are recognised by the Learning and Skills Council."

The charity's website said the teenager's personal budget allowed him to have "new adventures" including weekends away with friends and buying a season ticket for his favourite football club, Sheffield United, so he can attend matches with his brother.

"[He], his parents and

his brother and sisters are delighted with the opportunities that have opened up for all of them," it added.

In another case highlighted by the charity, a 16-year-old boy with epilepsy who needs 24-hour support from his family used some of his personal budget to pay a cousin to accompany him on shopping and cinema trips and to attend occasional musicals in London's West End. The money would previously have been spent on services such as respite care for his parents.

The reforms have significant implications for elderly people, giving them more control over how and where they are cared for. In one case they enabled a dying pensioner to spend the last few months of his life at home with his family, allowing him to hire a nurse or carer during the hours when his daughter was working and could not look after him. Under the old system operated by his local authority, he would have been entitled only to visits from carers at fixed times of the day and would have been forced to move into a care home.

In addition to the elderly, the personal budget scheme is designed to help individuals with long-term health conditions, including diabetes, heart disease and those who have suffered a stroke.

In another pilot scheme a woman who was suffering from chronic pain following the removal of a tumour on her spine used her personal budget



for massage and hydrotherapy sessions. The therapy provided effective pain relief, without the side-effects of drowsiness and disorientation linked to the long-term use of strong medicines.

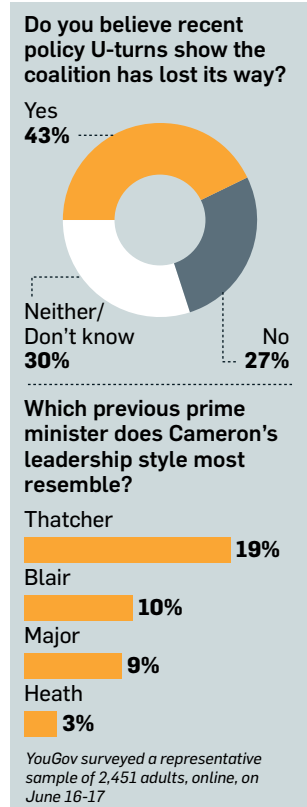
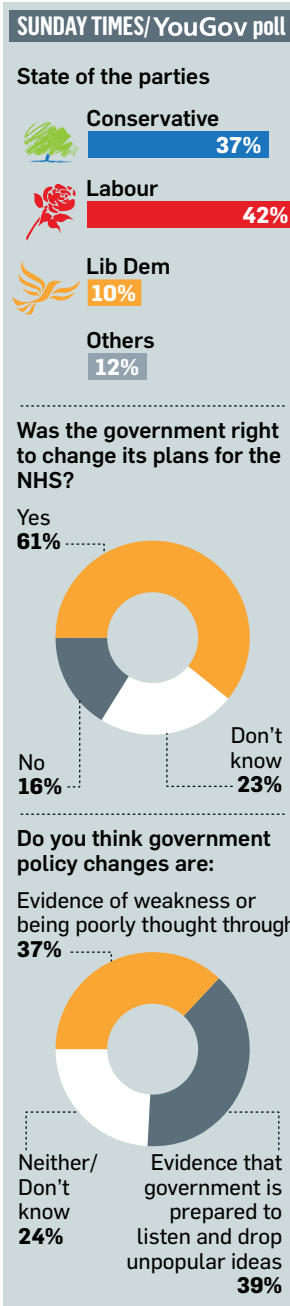
A government source familiar with the white paper said: "Patients currently have no control over spending on their condition. They access help step by step and have to take what is given to them by doctors. Under the changes they will get an annual budget and be able to make their own decisions about the best way to cope with their condition, in consultation with their doctors."

The reforms could also make a significant difference to thousands of parents of

children with special needs. Instead of battling with councils to obtain extra educational support for their offspring, they will be given budgets to spend as they choose, whether on special schooling or on extra tuition within mainstream schools.

Supporters of personal budgets have acknowledged that the scheme could create a new tier of bureaucrats responsible for assessing budgets and lead to the closure of existing council services. However, they say the changes have the power to transform the lives of vulnerable people.

Martin Routledge, who works for In Control, said: "Personal budgets are not a silver bullet. However, when people have financial control they can demand what care and help they want in the way they want it."



DAN CHARITY/ALAMY



The godfather

Steve Hilton is David Cameron's closest adviser in No 10, credited with making the Conservatives electable again by "detoxifying" the Tory brand.

He pads around Downing Street in shorts and socks, reportedly prompting one of Barack Obama's aides to ask "who's the beach bum?" when the US president visited. Colleagues jokingly describe his office as a "think bubble".

The former Saatchi & Saatchi man was behind Cameron's Arctic trip when in opposition, where he was photographed on a dog sled. They have been close since working together in the Conservative research department in the 1990s and Hilton was godfather to Ivan, Cameron's late son.



David Cameron wants to give parents more control over their children's schooling and to allow village councils to take control of parks, libraries, parking and sports facilities

