Volunteers are an integral part of third sector organisations that are expected to fill gaps left as public services funding decreases. Many are facing their own financial difficulties caused by this loss, and in some cases it appears that volunteers fulfil increasingly important functions. With volunteers being relied upon to perform day-to-day tasks (Donovan et al., 2011). It has been suggested that Big Society strategy will be the contribution they can make to service delivery (Taylor et al., 2011). This raises ethical questions such as what is being expected of volunteers? (Milligan and Fyfe, 2005; Nichols et al., 2005; Hutchison and Oakenden, 2008), while the possibility of volunteers taking over roles as an alternative to paid staff has also been raised (Taylor et al., 2011), along with concerns surrounding some groups being coerced into ‘volunteering’.

The motivation of this research is to give volunteers a voice by exploring issues arising from the government’s Big Society and recent economic policies from their perspective. It aims to discover what volunteers do including how they practise volunteering, the activities in which they are involved and in terms of obligation, professionalization and training; what the perceived and observed boundaries are between paid staff, volunteers and service users; to what extent third sector organisations are reliant upon volunteers; what the similarities and differences are between the experiences of volunteers in different sized organisations; and what perceptions of volunteers and volunteering are held by the different actors involved – the paid employees, service users and, especially, the volunteers themselves.

Given that literature suggests large, professional organisations are generally better equipped to make complex funding bids and contractual arrangements to provide public services than those at grass-roots level (Milbourne, 2009; Paxton and Pearce, 2005; Wilding, 2011), volunteers’ experiences may vary. This, in conjunction with geographical variations in the existence of third sector organisations (Pattie and Johnson, 2011), may impact on areas where the majority are small and locally embedded. This research will explore and compare the experiences of volunteers through case studies of one national and one local organisation based in a market town in the North of England. It will examine volunteering holistically, reflecting upon how the constituent part of the volunteer fits into the organisation as a whole, and consider not only the volunteers’ perspective but also how this coincides with or contradicts how they are viewed by other key figures.

Data is being collected through interviews – with paid staff, volunteers and service users; observations – including studying volunteers ‘in action’, exploring experiences and perceptions as well as practices of key figures; and document analysis – through examination of documentation such as mission statements, policies and minutes, allowing for further comparison between theoretical and perceived roles of the volunteer and what is happening in practice. This study is in its early stages but preliminary research indicates similarities suggesting other factors beyond organizational ‘type’ – size may indeed be an aspect to be explored, perhaps not only in terms of the organizations themselves but also of the geographical area in which they are based.

References
Taylor B, Mathers J Atfield T and Parry J (2011) “What are the challenges to the Big Society in maintaining lay involvement in health improvement, and how can they be met?”, Journal of Public Health 33(1) pp5-10.