

Why SOS? An introductory Q&A

Please click each question to see the answer.

Why do we have a Self-Organising System?

XR's tenth Principle and Value is that we are based on autonomy and decentralisation. The self-organising system (SOS for short) is a set of practices that guarantees this autonomy while also enabling the different parts of the movement to work together.

We also use the SOS to support other XR Principle and Values: mitigating power, reflecting and learning, and creating a regenerative culture.

But why does it have to be a system? Can't we just trust people to organise themselves?

For small groups that work more or less autonomously, the full SOS may be more than you need. But when the regions and nations are interacting with the XR UK Actions, and with the Media & Messaging team, and using the technology provided by the Digital team — and so on — we need some standard ways of organising and deciding, so that we're not having to spend time arguing from first principles all the time. These standard ways are set out in the [XR UK constitution](#).

Who decided how we should organise ourselves?

This decision was made by rebels and founders early in 2019. It is rooted in an evidence-based and tested approach to self-organising called holacracy. As well as safeguarding autonomy, we believe this approach contributes to a regenerative culture and embodies other XR Principles and Values, like mitigating the concentration of power and encouraging reflecting and learning. It aims to avoid some of the pitfalls that have undermined other progressive movements such as Occupy.

OK, so what's the gist of self organising?

Starting from the aims of the movement as a whole, we break this down into smaller parts. To achieve our demands, what are the things — actions, communications, regen, organisational,

technical etc — that we need to get done?

With each of these, we then ‘mandate’ a team to achieve them. A mandate is what the rest of the movement wants the team to do. Within this mandate the team has complete autonomy (within the Principles and Values) over how it organises itself and its work. Frequently this may involve further decentralisation, dividing the authority in its mandate into smaller mandates. These are given to sub-groups and ultimately to individual roles.

Does a mandate give you power?

The power to decide how you achieve a specified outcome or purpose, yes. But also some responsibilities. As well as the purpose, a mandate also comprises a set of accountabilities. These describe *how* you will achieve the purpose, in a series of activities that others in the movement can expect you to do. The accountabilities of a group, or a role, are what they can be held accountable for.

Is a mandate like a job description then?

Yes, and no. Yes, the mandate gives a general idea of *what* a group, or role, is working towards, and how. But a job description sets the limits of what you’re allowed to do, and a manager can direct how you do it. A mandate flips that on its head: you can do *anything you need to do* (that doesn’t interfere with someone else’s mandate) to achieve your purpose. You are not restricted to your accountabilities. Your accountabilities define what others can ask and expect of you. There are no managers, and no one can direct how you go about meeting your accountabilities.

Managing without managers? Does that work?

It can if we decentralise our power through mandates, and keep evolving our organisation. We establish feedback loops within relevant groups and roles, so that each limb of the movement can renew itself. This helps embody two of our Principles and Values: mitigating power, and valuing reflecting and learning. But in turn it depends on everyone being transparent about what their mandate is, enabling others across the movement to find who is accountable for what, and to give feedback. Hence all our mandates and as many groups as possible are published on the [organism view](#) of XR UK.

What roles does every team have?

To work within the [XR UK constitution](#), each team needs to have at least three roles (the Core Roles):

- someone to organise the work of the team and support members in their roles — the Internal Coordinator;
- someone to integrate the work of the team with the broader movement — the External Coordinator;

- someone to keep records of who's doing what in the team, and ensure all members are on the team communication channels — the Group Admin.

Together these roles make sure that the team is as transparent and accessible as it reasonably can be to the rest of the movement — so that we can all quickly find who's accountable for what. There are still quite a lot of meetings, but we keep them as short as possible.

What happens when people disagree?

It's inevitable we will disagree, sometimes strongly. The [XR UK constitution](#) outlines an Integrative Decision Making process. If someone feels that something is not working as it should, they express this tension — ideally explaining how it impacts their mandate — and make a proposal for addressing it.

And then you put the proposal to a vote, right?

Not exactly. Traditional voting is something we steer away from, because we try to be less binary than Yes/No, less factional than For/Against. First, a facilitator guides the process of checking everyone understands the proposal and its implications — particularly for them and their mandates. Then the facilitator invites reactions to the proposal. Finally they ask for any objections. We avoid majority rule — voting — or minority rule — veto. Objections are only valid if they convincingly show that harm would arise from the proposal (for example: if a group would no longer be able to exercise its mandate, that would be harm). “I don't think that's going to work” is a *reaction* that the proposer may or may not take on when implementing the proposal, but it is not a valid *objection*.

Does a valid objection mean you have to start from scratch with a new proposal?

Maybe, but hopefully not. Ideally we find a way to change proposal, so that it still achieves what it was intended to do, but without causing harm. A proposal can't go forward if there's a valid objection, but the group is invited to think creatively to suggest changes to the proposal. These changes should retain the purpose of the original proposal while also avoiding the harm identified in the objection. In this way we *integrate* the objection into the proposal, to meet the needs of both proposer and objector. Maybe no one is 100% happy, but hopefully no one holds a grudge either.