Understanding SOS terms

Terms in the XR UK Constitution and their definitions; how and why they may differ if your group is not signed up to the Constitution; why we use these terms

- Terms and Definitions in the Self-Organising System
- SOS terms beyond the Constitution
- Why does the Self-Organising System use special terms?

Terms and Definitions in the Self-Organising System

This table shows the definitions of the main SOS terms used in the XR UK Constitution.

SOS term	How we define it
Circle	A circle is a team that has been created with a **mandate**. It operates within the terms of the Constitution, which means that it makes its own decisions about how to achieve its purpose.
Role	A position within a **circle** to which the circle delegates some of its power — via a **mandate**. A member of the circle is appointed to a role for a fixed term.
Mandate	The authority given to a **role** or **circle**, to set out what they are working to achieve, and what others can expect them to do in order to achieve it. The concept of a mandate is central to how we distribute power across the movement. We define the power in terms of, first, a description of what they are working to achieve — the **purpose** — and what others can expect them to do in order to achieve it — a set of **accountabilities**. Some mandates also control one or more **domains**.
Purpose	The purpose of any **mandate** is the end state, or outcome, that the role or team is working towards.
Accountability	The accountabilities of a **mandate** are what the holder (a **circle** or **role**) is accountable for. They are the activities that the rest of the movement can expect you to do — the responsibility that comes with your autonomy. (Typically you will have to do a lot of other tasks, besides your accountabilities, to achieve the purpose of your role, but these are at your discretion.) Others can only hold you to account for your accountabilities.
Domain	A domain is a kind of resource which is controlled exclusively by the mandate-holder. For example, the design of the XR UK website is the domain of the UK Media and Messaging circle. It's important for their mandate that others do not interfere with this.

SOS term	How we define it
Sub-circle, Broader circle	Circles can delegate a specific task to a set of team members forming a sub-circle. Thus the structure of XR UK comprises one broadest circle, within which there are nested circles and sub-circles — each with a mandate that contributes to the whole. This simple extension of the Circle term reflects how the teams appear visually at organism.extinctionrebellion.uk and shows how teams are nested within each other, each having a part of the broader circle's authority delegated to them.
Internal Coordinator	A core role within each circle, whose purpose is that the team is healthy and achieving its mandate.
External Coordinator	A core role within each circle, whose purpose is that the team is represented in the broader circle, and aware of that circle's work and priorities.
Group Admin	A core role within each circle, whose purpose is that the team's governance records — including roles and appointments to roles, policies, any subcircles — are kept up to date on the Hub.

How circles, roles and mandates work together

As you can see from the definitions above, the concepts of **mandate**, **circle** and **role** are closely related to each other. They are also central to how we mitigate power, and how we are based on autonomy and decentralistion.

Mandates give authority to make decisions within a defined scope, and are distributed among circles and the roles within them to spread power and share responsibility.

To avoid clashes, it's important that mandates do not overlap or undermine each other. So mandates are created and amended in circle meetings, using collective decision-making.

If role holders are not fulfilling their mandate, there are several ways of resolving such issues. The decision-making and resolution processes are set out in the Constitution.

Circles must include three Core Roles: **Internal Coordinator**, **External Coordinator**, and **Group Admin**. Together they help to support the team, coordinate with other teams, and keep team records accessible. These roles are up for election at least every six months.

Beyond these three Core Roles, each circle is free to create any other role to meet its mandate. Circles are all different, but may have the same or similar roles for doing similar work within their circle (all teams need a role that checks team communication channels, for example).

SOS terms beyond the Constitution

Where and when do Self-Organising System terms vary?

> Any person or group can organise autonomously and take action in the name and spirit of XR so long as the action fits within XR's principles and values. In this way, power is decentralised, meaning that there is no need to ask for permission from a central group or authority.

How groups organise is up to them, as long as it aligns with the Principles and Values (including "We are based on autonomy and decentralisation" and "We actively mitigate power"). There is no requirement to follow the XR UK Constitution, but the advantage of doing so is that provides a set of agreements about how we distribute authority and decision-making across the movement. This provides clarity and transparency so that we do not lose time arguing about who has the right to make each decision.

Many groups — particularly Local Groups, Affinity Groups and some Community Groups — may feel that the full constitution is not appropriate for them. For example, they may not want to commit to having all the Core Roles in the constitution. But at the same time they may want to follow the basic 'pattern' of the Self-Organising System approach. (This also helps if, at a later date, the group circumstances change and it wants to sign up to the constitution.)

To support and enable this, the XR UK Hub uses the same basic structure of data for these groups, but uses different terms, as shown in the following table.

Signed up to the consitution	Not signed up
Mandate	Scope
Purpose	What this group/position is for
Role	Position

Signed up to the consitution	Not signed up
Accountability	Activity
Domain	Resources
External Coordinator	Connector
Internal Coordinator	Coordinator
Working Group, Circle, Sub-circle, Group, Team	Group, Team

Groups in the right hand column have not actually received a mandate from a broader circle. A mandate is how a circle or team distributes power and authority to its sub-circles. Groups on the right simply have their own authority under the Principles and Values (see top of page).

And because there is no mandate for the group, other groups cannot hold them 'accountable' for performing specific activities. So we replace 'Accountability' with 'Activity'. And so on.

Why does the Self-Organising System use special terms?

Our Principles and Values inspire us to find new ways of organising that foreground transparency and accountability, mitigate power and are based on autonomy and decentralisation. We also want to keep everything as simple and inclusive as possible. But if we use the language of more traditional organisations, this comes with baggage and assumptions, and will drag us away from our Principles.

We use a small set of special terms in the SOS. These are set out below, together with the reasons for using each term, and other terms that we have considered using instead. We keep these under review, and feedback and advice can be shared with the SOS team via our reception channel on Mattermost or to sos@extinctionrebellion.uk.

SOS term that we use	Why we use it	Alternatives we have considered
Circle	Frequently we use Team synonymously with Circle, but sometimes it is useful to distinguish a Circle from other types of team (project teams, local groups etc.) It ties into the whole decision making structure of the SOS.	Team, Group
Role	This term is widely used and understood in common usage, and there are no better alternatives with the same usage. We do not have ‘jobs’ or ‘posts’ in XR.	No clear alternatives

SOS term that we use	Why we use it	Alternatives we have considered
Mandate	Our use of this term is in line with the dictionary definition of mandate as “the authority given to a group of people.” The concept of a mandate is central to how we distribute power across the movement, and the way we use it is entirely in line with common usage. This term is embedded in UK teams, and is used in almost every meeting and thousands of conversations. It would be very difficult to change it now.	Authority
Purpose	Alternative terms bring other connotations that we prefer to avoid. For example, Goal sounds like something you would stop trying to do once you achieved it, whereas Purpose is the reason for your existence, whether you have achieved it (temporarily or permanently) or not.	Goal, Aim, Vision
Accountability	The accountabilities of a mandate are literally what the circle or role is accountable for. They are the activities that the rest of the movement can hold you to account for. Task and Activity do not cover the dimension of expectation and accountability. Responsibility is closer, but still not as clear as Accountability.	Responsibility, Task, Activity

SOS term that we use	Why we use it	Alternatives we have considered
Domain	A domain is a special, exclusive kind of resource. Some resources are not exclusive. For example, lots of teams use the Hub and the resources on it in the course of their work. So this would not be a domain. However, controlling access to specific permissions on the Hub — for maintaining specific information, for example — is something that we want to restrict to particular roles or circles. So we give them the domain of these Hub permissions. A domain is something that a team or role has exclusive control over, as part of their mandate. Hence we use Domain as a specialist term. The only other term that has been mentioned is Resource, but that could be confusing because of its wider, more general use.	Resource
Sub-circle, Broader-circle	We avoid referring to Child and Parent circles, because these come with cultural baggage concerning parental authority and oversight. This is exactly the opposite of the autonomy granted to sub-circles, which can decide how they go about achieving their mandate without the broader circle having any say, beyond setting priorities for its wider programme of work.	Child circle, Parent circle