Diversifying the board at Wen

Women's Environmental Network (Wen) is an environmental charity working collaboratively to create a fairer, healthier and sustainable world for everyone. They support women and communities to take climate action, amplify racialised and marginalised women's voices, and advocate for change.

Background & motivation

Wen's journey towards diversifying its board began over a decade ago through conversations between Co-directors, Kate Metcalf and Zarina Ahmad. Kate and other colleagues had long recognised that the Wen lacked diversity and this being problematic, wanted to take intentional steps to change that. Some of the conversations with Zarina involved reflecting on who held leadership and decision-making power within the organisation and to take a more strategic approach to recruitment.

At that point, Kate was prioritising ways to deepen engagement with the broader community. Zarina emphasised that when an organisation's team and leadership mirror the diversity of the people they serve, it naturally fosters stronger relationships and more meaningful impact with diverse communities.

Anti-racism training at Wen also shone a light on internal gaps, particularly around recruitment. This led to conversations about what positive action looks like in practice – not only in recruitment, but also in how Wen supports development pathways for Black and People of Colour (BPOC) colleagues, and questioning and recognising who ultimately holds influence within the organisation.

How Wen did it

Strategic and community-focused recruitment

Wen's Leadership Circle regularly reviews the skills and representation on the board. While decision-making is mostly held within the Leadership Circle, the structure is deliberately non-hierarchical, with different staff members involved. This spreads power and creates opportunities for staff to influence the direction of the organisation, where possible to attend board meetings to recommend potential board members.

Recognising that much of Wen's work is rooted in Tower Hamlets, the team made a concerted effort to recruit local community leaders to the board, using a very personal

approach. They reached out to people they had previously worked with and invited them to contribute. One example is Momtaz Ajid, who brought community insight and from her years of experience with Leaders in Community a youth organisation in Poplar.

Wen identified a gap in youth representation on their board and took active steps to address it. Board members were encouraged to connect with younger individuals within their networks to broaden participation. Momtaz, for example, reached out to a member from LIC (Leaders in Community) who has developed a career as a fundraiser. Even though this young person brings valuable skills to the table, Wen provide support to help them develop confidence and experience in governance, ensuring their contribution is both meaningful and sustained.

Creating supportive structures for inclusion

Wen provides a range of support mechanisms for less experienced board members, including:

- **Mentoring, buddying, and shadowing** to build confidence
- **Chairing support,** such as overseeing agendas, and checking in on areas like finance or governance, with reassurance that they don't need to be experts, when they have the opportunity to co chair board meetings.
- **Free governance training** for board members, like this.
- **Meetings with the Co-Director and Co chair and other board members** to ensure members are comfortable holding space.
- **Hybrid meeting options** to include national members, with travel expenses covered for in-person attendance.
- **Encouragement to attend Wen events** so board members feel part of the organisation and meet the wider Wen team when possible.

These practices aim to create a board culture where members are seen, heard, and valued, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds who might otherwise be invisibilised in traditional governance spaces.

Mentorship in practice

At Wen, mentoring takes a very practical and supportive form. Before a board member chairs a meeting, a more experienced colleague will step in to go through the agenda with them. They ask questions like: *What are you comfortable with? Are you okay with the financial forecast section? Is there anything you don't understand and we can help clarify that for you?*

This process is as much about reassurance as it is about preparation. The emphasis is on making sure new members feel confident, valued, and supported, not expected to be experts from the outset. Wen recognises and values the unique expertise each member brings and works to create an environment where they can contribute meaningfully from the start.

Personal, values-based appointments

Several board members joined through authentic relationships with Wen's team. The, Head of Movements, Climate Sisters, for instance, approached a contact with expertise in equality, diversity and inclusion, who aligned with Wen's anti-racist and gender equity values to join Wen's board and who now has stepped into the co-chair role.

Our board members join through personal introductions, bringing with them deep roots in community organising and social justice. Their involvement reflects Wen's commitment to values-led leadership. In several cases, guest speakers at Wen event, having already shown strong alignment with Wen's ethos, have later become board members, creating a natural pathway from collaboration to governance.

As Wen expanded its focus to a national level, the organisation recognised the importance of incorporating diverse geographic perspectives. Bringing in board representation from Scotland has added valuable insight into regional contexts, helping to shape more inclusive and responsive strategies across the UK.

Challenges and barriers

Wen encountered challenges, including people declining to join the board due to lack of time. While many recognised the importance of the work, capacity was a common barrier. Wen is now reflecting on how to compensate people for their time and ensure board membership is more accessible.

Importantly, Wen focused on approaching people already committed to the organisation's mission, ensuring strong alignment and mutual trust.

The impact of a diverse board

One of the clearest examples of impact was the organisation's stance on Palestine. While some longstanding board members were hesitant to take a position, newer members (particularly those from racially minoritised backgrounds) helped navigate the conversation. They brought both a commitment to justice and an understanding of governance, reassuring the board that speaking out would not risk the organisation's funding.

Having a diverse board has enriched Wen's direction and strengthened its foundations. It has helped Wen live more fully by its values and provided a critical lens through which gaps and inconsistencies can be identified.

As Zarina noted, it only works when it's authentic. When diversity is treated as a tick-box exercise, the benefits fall away. Wen has instead focused on deep relationships, clear values, and structural inclusion.

Sustaining inclusion

Wen has policies in place to ensure inclusive practice across governance and operations. One example is that staff are invited to join board meetings (as observers).

By continuously reflecting on power, inclusion, and representation, Wen is working to embed equity at every level of the organisation.