# Newcastle City Council faces backlash over Saudi investment pursuit



Newcastle City Council is currently facing scrutiny over its pursuit of investment from Saudi Arabia, amid rising concerns from human rights campaigners regarding the kingdom's reputation and its alleged use of sports to improve its international image. The controversy has intensified since the 2021 takeover of Newcastle United by a consortium led by the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF), which has drawn criticism for what some call "sportswashing."

This includes a spotlight on Newcastle United's recent success in the Carabao Cup, where chairman Yasir al-Rumayyan was photographed celebrating at Wembley alongside the team's players. Critics, including human rights advocates, have described this triumph as a “tainted victory,” pointing to instances such as the ongoing imprisonment of individuals like Manahel al-Otaibi, a Saudi fitness instructor serving an 11-year sentence for advocating women's rights.

Pam Smith, the chief executive of Newcastle City Council, participated in a UK trade and investment summit in Riyadh last May, where she highlighted Newcastle as a "gateway to Saudi" for potential investors. In an interview with the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), Smith defended the officials’ decision to seek investments from Saudi Arabia, arguing that abstaining from such opportunities on human rights grounds could limit the council’s ability to provide for the residents of Tyneside, particularly at a time when economic and cultural growth is a priority. She stated, "You have to keep in mind why you are doing these things. You are doing them to make Newcastle where it should be," emphasising the need for strategic investment to promote the city globally.

Despite expectations, tangible Saudi investments in Tyneside have not yet been realised. Speculation persists around various development opportunities, including the possible construction of a new football stadium, and ongoing discussions regarding a stake in Newcastle International Airport. Additionally, Newcastle University is set to play a significant role in a new Joint International Institute for Clean Hydrogen, in collaboration with Saudi and British universities.

Council leader Karen Kilgour clarified that while she has not engaged with any Saudi developers, future proposals would be assessed on their individual merits. Reiterating the political landscape, she stated, "It would matter to residents [in Newcastle] if investment did not come forward because we had taken a stance that was at odds with the Government, investors, and everyone else.”

In February, Kilgour met with a group of human rights activists representing families of individuals who have been imprisoned or disappeared in Saudi Arabia. During that meeting, concerns were raised about the city's relationship with the kingdom. Human rights organisation ALQST expressed disappointment over the council's reluctance to leverage its position regarding human rights issues, suggesting that there are multiple avenues through which the council could express solidarity with victims.

Critics of the council, such as John Hird from the NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing (NUFCFAS) group, argue that shifting responsibility for human rights concerns to the national government is inconsistent, particularly given the council’s previous decision to sever ties with a sister city in China due to human rights abuses against the Uyghur population. The NUFCFAS group intends to push the council for greater transparency about dealings with the Saudi regime, questioning whether it is appropriate for Newcastle’s reputation to suffer due to the council's increasing ties with Saudi Arabia.

Kilgour responded to these concerns by stating, “Our relationship is with the club and not the owners,” insisting that her interactions are focused on the club's operational management rather than its ownership. She reiterated the council’s condemnation of human rights violations globally and acknowledged the complexities of diplomacy, indicating that significant change often requires national-level discussions and engagements.

The PIF has been contacted for comment regarding this situation.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/newcastle-city-council-urged-address-human-rights-concerns-amid-saudi-investment-controversy-1724657> - This article corroborates concerns over Saudi investment in Newcastle, particularly in relation to human rights abuses and the controversy surrounding Newcastle City Council's pursuit of such investments.
2. <https://www.asianstandard.co.uk/newcastle-council-and-nufc-face-backlash-after-emails-reveal-saudi-investment-ties-amid-human-rights-concerns/> - The article highlights the backlash Newcastle Council and NUFC have faced due to revealed ties with Saudi investment, emphasizing human rights concerns and the push for more investment despite these issues.
3. <https://northeastbylines.co.uk/region/north-east/newcastle-council-leader-to-meet-human-rights-activists/> - This piece mentions Council Leader Karen Kilgour's meeting with human rights activists, discussing concerns over Newcastle's relationship with Saudi Arabia and potential implications for human rights.
4. <https://www.noahwire.com> - The source provides background information on the controversy involving Newcastle City Council and Saudi Arabia, including criticisms of 'sportswashing' and the role of Newcastle United.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/19/saudi-arabia-human-rights-concerns> - Although not explicitly mentioned in the search results, this URL could provide general context on Saudi Arabia's human rights concerns often cited by critics of Newcastle's ties with the kingdom.
6. <https://www.hrw.org/topic/mideast-north-africa/saudi-arabia> - Human Rights Watch provides extensive reporting on Saudi Arabia's human rights record, which is relevant to the criticisms faced by Newcastle City Council for its engagements with the kingdom.
7. <https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/newcastle-council-saudi-arabia-pif-31422761> - Please view link - unable to able to access data