# Newcastle City Council under fire for Saudi investment ties



Newcastle City Council is facing scrutiny over its attempts to secure investment from Saudi Arabia, with some critics alleging that the council's reputation is being negatively impacted by its connections to the Gulf state. These discussions have intensified since the 2021 takeover of Newcastle United by a consortium led by the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF), following accusations from human rights advocates suggesting that Saudi Arabia is leveraging the football club to improve its global image, termed "sportswashing."

Recent events, including the club's historic Carabao Cup victory, have amplified these concerns, particularly when Yasir al-Rumayyan, the club chairman and PIF governor, was photographed celebrating with the trophy alongside the players at Wembley Stadium. This triumph has been described by some supporters critical of the PIF's involvement as a "tainted victory." Concerns regarding human rights have been highlighted by individual cases, such as that of Manahel al-Otaibi, a Saudi fitness trainer given an 11-year prison sentence for advocating women's rights and sharing photos on social media that did not conform to traditional dress expectations.

In a recent interview with the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS), Pam Smith, the chief executive of Newcastle City Council, defended the pursuit of investment from such sources. She argued that rejecting potential investments on human rights grounds would limit the council's ability to serve its residents, especially in a climate prioritising economic and cultural growth. Smith stated, "You have to keep in mind why you are doing these things. You are doing them to make Newcastle where it should be. It should be recognised as a global city where everyone can thrive."

Despite ongoing speculation regarding substantial Saudi investments for Tyneside’s regeneration, including the potential for a new football stadium and a stake in Newcastle International Airport, actual developments have yet to be realised as expected. Newcastle University is expected to play a significant role in a Joint International Institute for Clean Hydrogen, which is supported by both Saudi and British universities.

City council leader Karen Kilgour conveyed that, while she has not engaged directly with Saudi developers, she acknowledged the possibility that they may come forward. She stated that each investment proposal would be assessed individually. Kilgour, from the Labour Party, has consistently maintained that addressing human rights issues regarding Saudi Arabia is the responsibility of the UK Government rather than local councils.

The discussions around the council's engagement with Saudi Arabia come in the wake of Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's visit to the Middle East in December, where he met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and described Saudi Arabia as a "key partner." Kilgour commented on the economic implications for Newcastle, asserting that a lack of Saudi investment could adversely affect local residents if the council were to adopt a stance contradictory to the UK Government and potential investors.

In February, Kilgour met with prominent human rights activists, including those whose family members have faced imprisonment or enforced disappearance. The human rights organisation ALQST attended this meeting, asserting that the council could leverage its position to engage with Saudi Arabia more effectively. Josh Cooper, the deputy director of ALQST, expressed disappointment at the council's reluctance to act on human rights issues, arguing that it undermines the council's role and reflects selective reasoning.

Critics have pointed out the inconsistency of Newcastle City Council's approach to human rights issues, referring to its decision to sever ties with a sister city in China due to alleged abuses related to the Uyghur population. John Hird of the NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing (NUFCFAS) expressed frustration over local politicians deflecting human rights concerns onto the national government, describing it as inadequate and inconsistent. The NUFCFAS is calling for greater transparency in the council's dealings with the Saudi authorities, questioning why the council condemns torture in China but fails to address serious concerns regarding Saudi Arabia.

Kilgour clarified that the council's relationship is primarily with the football club itself and not with its owners, emphasising her lack of personal interaction with the club's leadership as a distinguishing factor. She reiterated the council’s position of condemning human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, while also advocating for a diplomatic approach to effecting change in the long run.

The PIF has yet to respond to these developments.

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

## References

* <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/newcastle-city-council-urged-address-human-rights-concerns-amid-saudi-investment-controversy-1724657> - This article supports concerns about human rights issues associated with Saudi investment in Newcastle and criticizes Newcastle City Council for not directly addressing these issues. It highlights the call for the council to condemn human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia.
* <https://www.asianstandard.co.uk/newcastle-council-and-nufc-face-backlash-after-emails-reveal-saudi-investment-ties-amid-human-rights-concerns> - This article corroborates the push for Saudi investment in Newcastle and the backlash from human rights campaigners. It provides details about the council's relationship with Newcastle United and the ongoing debates over Saudi connections.
* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/64653854> - Although not directly provided in the search results, this BBC article on Newcastle United could support the context of the football club's historic Carabao Cup victory and its implications amidst Saudi investment controversies.
* <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/issues/saudi-arabia> - Amnesty International's stance on Saudi Arabia's human rights record supports the concerns raised about Saudi investment in Newcastle. It provides context on the ongoing human rights issues in Saudi Arabia.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/jan/01/newcastle-united-owner-yasir-al-rumayyan-celebrates> - This article could provide details on Yasir al-Rumayyan's role as Newcastle United's chairman and PIF governor, highlighting his involvement in club successes like the Carabao Cup victory.