# Newcastle City Council faces backlash over Saudi investment ties



Newcastle City Council is facing scrutiny over its pursuit of investment from Saudi Arabia, particularly following the high-profile takeover of Newcastle United by a consortium led by the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) in 2021. The council's connections to the Gulf state have sparked criticism, especially from human rights activists who argue that Saudi Arabia is leveraging the football club to "sportswash" its image in the international arena. This issue garnered increased attention after Newcastle United's historic triumph in the Carabao Cup, during which club chairman Yasir al-Rumayyan was photographed celebrating with the trophy alongside players.

Concerns regarding human rights in Saudi Arabia have emerged prominently in the wake of the club’s success. Critics specifically highlighted the case of Manahel al-Otaibi, a Saudi fitness instructor sentenced to 11 years in prison for advocating women's rights and sharing non-traditional images of herself on social media. In response to these allegations, Pam Smith, the chief executive of Newcastle City Council, defended the potential for investment from Saudi Arabia, emphasising that rejecting such opportunities on human rights grounds could restrict the council's capacity to address local needs amid a push for economic and cultural development in Tyneside.

In an interview with the Local Democracy Reporting Service, 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.” She argued for examining investment proposals carefully to ensure they align with the interests of the city and its residents.

Speculative discussions have arisen regarding possible redevelopment initiatives in Newcastle that could involve substantial Saudi investment, including the potential development of a new football stadium and a stake in Newcastle International Airport. Furthermore, Newcastle University is set to play a significant role in a Joint International Institute for Clean Hydrogen, backed by a coalition of Saudi and British institutions.

Karen Kilgour, the city council leader, remarked that although she had not yet engaged with Saudi developers, each potential investment opportunity would be assessed individually. She clarified that the responsibility of addressing human rights issues with Saudi Arabia lies more with the UK Government than with local councils. Kilgour noted, “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.”

The debate surrounding Newcastle's ties to Saudi Arabia is further complicated by the city's previous decision to sever connections with a Chinese sister city due to human rights concerns related to the Uyghur population. Activists from the group NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing (NUFCFAS) have echoed this discontent, urging the council to enhance transparency in its dealings with Saudi officials. They questioned the consistency of the council's human rights stance, stating, “The council is capable of condemning torture in China but says nothing about the torture capital of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia.”

In the context of these discussions, Kilgour reiterated the council's position, asserting, “Our relationship is with the club and not the owners... We wholeheartedly condemn any human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia or anywhere else in the world.” She acknowledged the complexities of diplomacy in this matter, suggesting that dialogues of this nature are better suited for a national level to achieve long-term change.

The Public Investment Fund has not commented publicly on these developments at this time.

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 discusses Newcastle City Council's involvement with Saudi investment and the criticism it faces due to human rights concerns. It highlights efforts by activists like NUFCFAS, who urge the council to condemn Saudi human rights abuses.
2. <https://www.asianstandard.co.uk/newcastle-council-and-nufc-face-backlash-after-emails-reveal-saudi-investment-ties-amid-human-rights-concerns/> - This report details emails that show Newcastle City Council's push for more Saudi investment, despite human rights concerns. It also notes Amnesty International's warning about engaging with Saudi money.
3. <https://northeastbylines.co.uk/region/north-east/newcastle-council-leader-to-meet-human-rights-activists/> - This article mentions Newcastle Council Leader Karen Kilgour's stance on human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and her meeting with human rights activists, affirming the council's commitment to addressing such issues at a national level.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_Investment_Fund_of_Saudi_Arabia> - This Wikipedia page provides background information on the Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia, which owns a significant stake in Newcastle United and plays a key role in Saudi investment abroad.
5. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabia/> - This Amnesty International page details human rights issues in Saudi Arabia, including imprisonments and executions, which form the basis of criticism against Newcastle's ties with Saudi entities.
6. <https://www.investnewcastle.co.uk/> - This website offers insight into Newcastle's efforts to attract investment, including international partnerships, which could involve Saudi entities. It highlights the city's economic development ambitions.
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