



# Newcastle University Islamic Society

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For Immediate Release

## **NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY DEDICATED MUSLIM PRAYER SPACE FOR OVER 30 YEARS UNDER THREAT**

**Muslim Students concerned over University plans to CLOSE and change the purpose of the King George VI Building, where they pray five times a day.**

On 7<sup>th</sup> July, Newcastle University staff made the shocking announcement that the King George VI Building – part of which has been the University’s dedicated Muslim Prayer Room for over 30 years - will be closed on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> July with only 3 weeks notice and NO suitable alternative in place!

The Islamic Society (ISOC) committee are still to gain full clarity on the decision, due to the mixed messages that have been given throughout this process. Initially, the ISOC were informed that the building (where the prayer facility is situated in) would **permanently** be closed, in order to accommodate the new School of Pharmacy. In response, the ISOC launched an online petition - signed by more than 5000 supporters in just four days – to challenge the permanent removal of the building (and subsequent prayer space) (see <https://www.change.org/p/newcastle-university-stop-newcastle-university-closing-the-muslim-prayer-space-in-king-george-vi-building> )

Due to the overwhelming response, the University then informed the ISOC that they would only be closing the building temporarily due to asbestos removal. However, they further stated that because of this, they would re-open the space to a Multi-Faith Room, instead of a dedicated Muslim Prayer Space, and **under the management of the university**. We feel this undermines the democratically elected and empowered Islamic society’s management of the dedicated Muslim Prayer space, which has functioned effectively for decades, with a long term working relationship with the Students’ Union. Moreover, it seems to the ISOC that this is an “argument of convenience” (i.e. the asbestos removal is a convenient opportunity to change the prayer room), as there has been no reason, consultation, initial proposal or complaint made to change the status quo.

The Islamic Society Committee and its members are extremely aggrieved by the decision of the University and the manner in which the whole process has taken place. The lack of consultation and sufficient research on behalf of the University has also shown that it has very little understanding of the needs of the Muslim students on campus. The current facilities are already overflowing, with students often having to perform Friday prayers outside the building due to a lack of space, which means there is realistically no capacity to also want to ‘house’ other faiths’ societies on the same premises.

The dedicated Muslim Prayer space maintained by the Islamic society is a big asset to the University, which attracts numerous students from Muslim backgrounds, as highlighted on the Newcastle University website:

*“The Islamic Society maintains the prayer room on campus, and arranges regular lectures, study circles and social events.”* (<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/undergraduate/life/religion/>)

The following testimony from a Muslim student highlights the importance of the dedicated Muslim prayer space on campus: *“The Islamic society and university prayer room were some of the reasons I chose to attend Newcastle University. I feel that the closure of the prayer room is an injustice to all Muslim students at this university wanting to express their faith.”*

The University of Newcastle prides itself on equal opportunity and diversity, celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> year in which Martin Luther King Jr was given his honorary degree and recognition of equality, fighting oppression and injustice to minority groups. Thus, we hope it lives up to this standard in fulfilling the needs of the Muslim students in these very trying times of wide spread Islamophobia in society by providing the equity and equality it has shown over the years. The university should cater for the needs of ALL faith groups and should look to provide suitable space for all without compromising the needs and well being of one group over another. The needs of each group differ and showing equity in this case would be to provide the same or equal space for Muslim students AND provide a sufficient separate space to fulfil the needs accordingly for other faith groups who require it.

The Newcastle University Islamic Society is an award-winning community known for its integration and significant input into the University. It should, therefore, be noted that the ISOC are not opposed to the idea and concept of multi-faith recognition. This is highlighted by the inter-faith work and activities we have been involved in. The issue is the dedicated prayer space being forcefully removed from the Islamic Society and accepting a multi-faith space when the **current** needs of the Muslim students are not entirely being met.

As it stands the Islamic society is requesting the university to overturn its current decision to convert the Muslim prayer space to a multi faith space; to include the Islamic society in discussions **before** making such big decisions which affects the well being of a significant number of students on campus; and to keep the management of the space to the Islamic society who have managed and run the space effectively for many years.

The Islamic Society will continue to try to engage in conversation with the University to get answers to our questions and to find a solution, as the current plan simply does not suffice.

For more questions about the ongoing campaign of the Islamic Society to save the dedicated Muslim Prayer Facilities, contact us via the following email: [Islamic.soc@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Islamic.soc@ncl.ac.uk)

You can also visit our website at [www.newcastleisoc.com](http://www.newcastleisoc.com).

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