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Rejected: the mosque plan that grew so big it attracted the wrong sort of crowd A decade-long battle comes to an end - but east London is as split as ever

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The mosque would have a prayer hall for up to 7,440 men and a separate facility for about 2,000 women

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Plans by a missionary Islamic sect to build one of Britain's largest mosques that left a community divided and attracted far-right groups, including the English Defence League, were tonight rejected.

Police officers were stationed outside the Old Town Hall of the east London borough of Newham as about 3,000 supporters of the plans to build the mosque gathered tonight. Tablighi Jamaat, a socially conservative Muslim revivalist movement with a strong presence in east London, wanted to build a mosque on a site in West Ham, close to the Olympic Park, to accommodate more than 9,000 worshippers – about four times the capacity of St Paul's. If the plans were approved, the building would place the site on a par with Morden's Baitul Futuh, the largest mosque in Western Europe.

Opposition initially came from locals but in more recent years the mosque issue has become a magnet for far-right groups such as the EDL, which has looked to exploit the controversy as part of its wider protests against Islam.

At about 8.30pm last night, the proposals were rejected by councillors on the grounds the building was "too big", would generate too much traffic and the site was "heavily contaminated". "Councillors considered this application at length and with great care before deciding to reject it," said Councillor Conor McAuley, Newham's executive member for regeneration and strategic planning. "The council undertook a rigorous and extensive consultation about the proposals in the run-up to this decision." Tablighi had spent the best part of a decade pushing for planning permission and said the building was desperately needed to accommodate the followers it has across the capital. Thousands of members gather each Thursday for a mass prayer meeting in the area, on a disused brownfield site. Alongside the mosque, it hoped to build a 2,000-capacity dining hall, an Islamic library, a sports pavilion and playing fields for the wider community. Alan Craig, a local councillor and head of the Christian People's Alliance which has led opposition to the mosque, said: "I'm opposed to both the nature of the group and the size of the mosque they want to build. We have freedom of religion and if Tablighi Jamaat wanted to build a neighbourhood mosque, that's fine. But they want to build a massive headquarters in an area that cannot support such a building." Critics of Tablighi, which include those within the wider Muslim community, said the group was isolationist, socially conservative and a gateway to radicalism. The group however claimed it refrained from "political or controversial activities and stands for democracy and freedom" and that it promoted "social and religious integration". More than 25,000 letters in support of the mosque had been received by the council, compared with 3,000 against. But in recent weeks the No lobby began to scent victory. Last month, Newham's planning officers recommended councillors reject the plans, while the council recently lodged papers in the High Court to stop the

site being used as a temporary prayer location. In West Ham, there were mixed views about the mosque. Muhammad Khan, a newsagent, said: "It's a good thing. People will go there to get education. It is good for the community, especially the children." Another local, who gave his name only as David, added: "On paper, it's great, it's a celebration of cultures and religion. But in practice you don't always get that full integration."

Tablighi Jamaat: A brief history

The issue is a magnet for the English Defence League and other far-right groups. The organisation behind the plan to build a giant mosque in Newham is one of the lesser-known and most misunderstood Muslim revivalist movements that came out of north India at the turn of the last century. Tablighi Jamaat began as an offshoot of Deobandism, the deeply socially conservative school of Islam to which movements such as the Taliban also trace a theological lineage. But they espouse none of the violent militancy of their ideological cousins who continue to blight Afghanistan and much of Pakistan. Founded in the 1920s by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, the organisation places enormous emphasis on returning Muslims to what it believes is the correct interpretation of Islam. It promotes grassroots preaching and is avowedly apolitical, something which enabled it to flourish across much of the Muslim world throughout the mid-20th century because it was not seen as a threat to the ruling classes. Much like Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, Tablighi volunteers spend their time going door to door spreading dawah (preaching Islam). But Tablighi Jamaat concentrates on netting Muslim followers and rarely preaches to non-believers. Outside of predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods, it is rare to come across followers. Some law enforcement officials, particularly in the US and France, have accused Tablighi of being a "gateway" organisation to more militant or violent groups. Tablighi has long argued that this accusation is unfair given the sect's view that earthly politics should be avoided and that followers have been routinely criticised by more militant Islamist groups for not being political enough. Where Tablighi can be more fairly criticised is its often isolationist views, which cause difficulties in western societies where immigrant communities need to integrate.

Jerome Taylor