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Park bosses accused of using Lake District diversity plans as cover for commercialisation



Tony Lywood said claims that he should not speak up were “undemocratic”

It is home to hills once owned by Beatrix Potter and to some of Britain’s finest scenery, but the peace of the Lake District has been shattered by a row involving allegations that its managing authority is trying to silence a critic who said the area was at risk of becoming a theme park.

The Lake District National Park Authority, which runs the Unesco-listed site in Cumbria, wants to attract groups other than the white, middle class and able-bodied who make up most park users. However, plans for a 6.4km strip of tarmac on a rural path from Keswick to Threlkeld and the use of off-road 4x4s in Little Langdale have prompted a backlash from communities within the park.

Tony Lywood, a board member of the authority, is the only one to have spoken out, accusing park bosses of using the wish for diversity as a “smokescreen” for commercialisation. Now he claims that the authority is trying to silence him by investigating his conduct.

Richard Leafe, the chief executive, Peter Allen, the deputy chairman, and Tony Watson, the head of communications, have accused him of breaching the authority's code for members. According to a complaint seen by *The Times* Mr Lywood is accused of "bringing the authority into disrepute" and "damaging the reputation" of senior management after "implying dishonesty in their conduct and stated aims". If he is found to have breached the code, sanctions could include being banned from the authority's office. He could also be reported to Cumbria county council, which appointed him.

Mr Lywood had questioned the ambitions of the park over the plan and other schemes considered in recent years, including a zip wire across Thirlmere, driverless electric pods and the possibility of a gondola system to Whinlatter forest centre. He said that the "cultural and demographic diversity is merely a smokescreen to a green light on a development and adventure gold rush on what is a Unesco world heritage site", and that suggestions that he could not speak out because he was a councillor were "undemocratic, highly irregular and smack of the suppression of free speech".

Last month Mr Leafe said that the park was "deficient" in terms of the numbers of young people, ethnic minorities and less able-bodied visitors, adding that it needed "to be able to sell the national park to everybody in Britain, all society, and it's important that it doesn't just become exclusive to one single-use group".

David Burn, the mayor of Keswick, said that investigating Mr Lywood was an "abuse of power" and an attempt to silence communities unpersuaded by "propaganda". He added: "The board and executive of the national park are trying to push things through that 40,000 people who live in the park just don't agree with. The authority is supposed to be protecting the beauty of the Lake District but for those that live here that is not what they are trying to do."

A spokeswoman for the Lake District National Park said board members were expected to "carefully balance their membership with their local or political

commitments”. She added that the investigation was confidential and the park was “disappointed that Mr Lywood has decided not to adhere to this process”.