# Future of railway schemes in North Staffordshire in limbo following government funding cuts



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**Stoke-on-Trent, UK** – Major railway projects in North Staffordshire teeter on the edge following the government's abrupt decision to dismantle the Restoring Your Railway (RYR) programme. Promising initiatives like the Stoke-Leek Line and the reopening of Meir Station now face an uncertain future, signaling a clear disregard for regional development outside the immediate metropolitan interests.

The RYR, a brainchild of the previous Conservative government, earmarked £500 million for these vital regional projects, a sum repurposed from HS2’s second phase with the aim to bolster local economies and connectivity. Yet, in a cavalier move, Chancellor Rachel Reeves has axed the programme, citing a need to save £76 million next year amidst an alleged £800 million transport funding deficit. Such a decision clearly prioritizes fiscal conservatism over regional rejuvenation, betraying the needs of communities that stand to benefit most from these investments.

Transport Secretary Louise Haigh’s promise to review each project individually offers little solace. The Stoke-on-Trent City Council is frantically seeking clarity, likely aware that political winds rarely blow in favor of smaller, less influential regions.

A council spokesperson conveyed the council’s agitation: "It is our understanding that schemes are likely to be assessed individually by the Transport Secretary. At present, we don't know what this means for our proposed schemes, such as Meir Station and the Stoke-Leek Line, which are at varying stages of the business case. We are seeking clarity from the Department for Transport."

Meanwhile, Mike Gledhill, Labour leader of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council, complacently downplayed the axe on RYR. He suggested prioritizing bus services, a stopgap rather than a solution, and touted minor successes like bus route extensions, which pale in comparison to the profound impact railway projects could deliver.

In stark contrast, Karen Bradley, Conservative MP for Staffordshire Moorlands, articulated her dismay and determination: "We have shown that the Leek to Stoke line is economically viable and would bring great benefits to the Moorlands. I will continue lobbying and fighting to have the line restored," she asserted, embodying a spirited resistance Robinson neglecting regional voices.

The original vision of RYR, introduced by former Prime Minister Boris Johnson in 2020, sought to undo decades of neglect following the Beeching cuts with a £500 million budget. Critics who foresaw that this funding fell short were proven right, as the Labour government severs a lifeline for regional connectivity.

Services between Stoke-on-Trent and Leek stopped half a century ago, with both Meir Station and Leek’s station closing in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite a feasibility study funded in 2021 and preliminary work on Meir Station awarded £1.7 million in 2022, these ambitions now appear dashed.

Reeves has attributed the funding eliminations to a so-called inherited £22 billion deficit, claiming a cleanup of unfunded transport pledges amounting to £2.9 billion. Her narrative of rebuilding and fiscal responsibility overlooks the long-term economic uplift that infrastructure projects provide, instead opting for short-term book balancing.

In a disconcertingly uneven approach, the North East enjoys a different fate. The Leamside Line and Metro extension to Washington proceed unhindered, while ambitious plans like the Ferryhill station reopening stall. NECA's proactive funding and business case developments underscore what North Staffordshire is missing—a collaborative government that recognizes and acts upon regional importance.

Mayor Kim McGuinness of NECA optimistically declared, "We will still push on with extending the Metro to Washington and reopening the Leamside Line. The plans that we have are still very much there." Such optimism is scant in North Staffordshire, where project after project faces cancellation.

Gateshead’s transport cabinet member, Councillor Martin Gannon, lamented, "For decades, perhaps generations, we have recognised that the North East has not been treated fairly in transport infrastructure investment. The creation of the Combined Authority put us in a stronger place to start addressing those issues."

As the government’s frenzied reassessment of its transport infrastructure portfolio plays out, communities in North Staffordshire are left in disbelief, grappling with the harsh reality of broken promises and abandoned projects. It is a stark reminder that political rhetoric about levelling up is often just that—rhetoric.