**Hazel Blears (Salford and Eccles) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am very pleased to have secured this debate—I am sure that my constituents will be happy—and it is good to see the Minister present.

Trains in Eccles have a long and proud history. When we opened the very first passenger railway, the Liverpool and Manchester railway, on 15 September 1830, Eccles played a part. It was actually a sad part, because tragically, on the day that the railway was launched, the Member of Parliament for Liverpool was struck by Stephenson’s Rocket. Stephenson managed to evacuate the injured MP, Mr Huskisson, to Eccles on a train, but sadly he did not recover from his injuries and died. Eccles therefore has a proud role in the history of the railways. However, that is the past, and my constituents are very concerned about the future of railway services in Eccles.

We have an amazing campaign group called Freccles, which I hope the Minister is aware of, because the Secretary of State, when he visited us recently to mark the beginning of the electrification of the Liverpool-Manchester line, met members of Freccles. The Secretary of State, in his subsequent correspondence to me, has been very complimentary about them. They are entirely a group of volunteers—Mr Stephen Clapham, Professor David Yates, Mr Sean Dunne, Mr Eoan Edwards and Ms Nina Keshishian—and they have been campaigning since 2005 to get an improved railway service at Eccles. They first came to see me in 2009, and together we have been campaigning for the past five years to get some progress.

We have a simple request. At the moment, Eccles station has an hourly service into Manchester. We are just a few miles outside Manchester and a thriving town in our own right. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) has Patricroft station in her constituency, where there are equally good campaign groups. We have an hourly service, and we are campaigning for two trains an hour—a half-hourly service. I would not have thought that, after five years of campaigning and bringing all our powers to bear, it was too much to ask. Unfortunately, we have made little progress over that period.

**Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab):** The town of Eccles is split between my right hon. Friend’s constituency and mine—even though Eccles station is in her constituency—which is why I am here to support her debate.

Groups such as Freccles do a wonderful job in maintaining the fabric and look of the building. Nevertheless, does my right hon. Friend agree that, beyond their excellent work in making those improvements, what they want more than anything is the half-hourly service? They already do brilliant volunteering, but the issue is not just about how the station looks, but about how the train service runs.

**Hazel Blears:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. The group has regenerated the whole station. We have flowers on the platforms, a lovely entrance way

**26 Mar 2014 : Column 126WH**

and a mural; in fact, our station is better than the service. What we now need to do is ensure that the service lives up to the efforts of Freccles, which has done such a wonderful job.

We started in 2009. I wrote to Arriva Trains, which was operating the service between Manchester Piccadilly and Chester, asking for two trains an hour. It wrote back to me, saying, “The line is fairly congested. There is insufficient track capacity for additional stops without creating delay to other services. In addition, many of our trains are already very crowded on this route, and we would need to agree a strategy with the Department for Transport to secure sufficient rolling stock.” So, in 2009, we had little track capacity and overcrowded rolling stock, and Arriva Trains was not able to help us out.

Arriva directed me to Northern Rail, so we took the case up with that company. We had correspondence back and forth, culminating in a letter on 28 January 2011. Northern Rail gave me a much more detailed response, including the times of trains at key junctions and saying that it needed clearances of a specified number of minutes to be maintained. It said that it would not be technically feasible to insert an additional stop at Eccles station. It also talked about track capacity being limited at the Liverpool end of the route; apparently, if the train were to stop at Eccles station, it would result in the service passing Huyton junction around two minutes later, clashing with the 08 past the hour Wigan-Liverpool local service.

There were clearly a number of obstacles in our way, preventing a change to the system, and Northern Rail was also unable to help us. It said, “I am sorry that I cannot meet your aspiration to change the timetable on this occasion.” However, it told me that it was going to do new signage and some refurbishment. We therefore have new signage and refurbishment, but we do not have any trains.

Nevertheless, we persevered and had a number of meetings with the Greater Manchester transport executive. We also met with Salford city council, which has been supportive, and Transport for Greater Manchester. I have also been in correspondence with the Secretary of State to raise the issues.

I honestly believe that there is a good case for having two trains stopping at Eccles every hour. Over the past few years, the Eccles area has changed quite dramatically. MediaCity has now come to Salford, with the relocation of BBC and ITV. There is a lot of regeneration going on; we are about to have the regeneration of Port Salford in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South. Eccles station is now becoming much more of an interchange, signposting people to the Metrolink, which stops in Eccles and which has been able to open up the whole west side of Salford for regeneration.

Transport for Greater Manchester has a matrix on how many passengers a station must have to justify having two trains an hour. Over the past three years, the average number of passengers at Eccles station was 139,583. On TFGM’s analysis, if there are between 50,000 and 500,000 trips a year, the station is entitled to two trains an hour. The lower limit is 50,000, but we are at 140,000, so we more than meet that criterion.

TFGM said that, because Eccles station is an interchange with both Metrolink and bus services, it could justify a three-trains-an-hour, or even a four-trains-an-hour, service.

**26 Mar 2014 : Column 127WH**

It says that it has conveyed that view a number of times in its reports to the train operators, and it has met Freccles on a number of occasions.

We have been told time and again that the matter will be addressed in the new franchises that are being considered for train services in Greater Manchester and the north-west. We were hopeful that, when the line was electrified, journey times would be considerably shortened, enabling us to overcome the difficulties that Northern Rail set out—the tight time scales of trains passing one another, and there not being the minutes available in the timetable to do essential maintenance, or to manoeuvre rolling off to another siding before the train came back on. When we got electrification, we thought, “Well, at least this is a chance to achieve our aspirations.” However, we still do not have an agreement that we can have two trains an hour. The reason why I have secured this debate is that I am beginning to worry that the time scale is going on and on, and it is unacceptable.

We have now been told that a direct franchise for 22 months has been awarded, which runs from April 2014 to February 2016, after which there will be a completely new franchise. As I understand it, in that new franchise—I want the Minister to address this—there is a possibility to have more flexible commissioning in addition to the basic service. There is therefore a possibility in that new franchise to commission for two trains an hour to stop at Eccles station.

The consultation will begin this summer, as the Secretary of State has written to me to confirm. He also said that Freccles—indeed I and my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South, as Members of Parliament—may make representations, which will be taken into account in drawing up the new franchise. He said, “I am pleased to note that Freccles are already working closely with Northern, a current operator”, and suggested that Freccles puts their views in for the 2016 franchise. He said, “This is because our specification for the full franchise may well give bidders flexibility to propose additional services over and above those we specify as requirements for the franchise.” Therefore, I can see just a glimmer of hope that, after nearly 10 years of campaigning to get a half-hourly service at Eccles, we might have the prospect of success.

**Barbara Keeley:** My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Taking into account her important point about passenger numbers and the access to employment that could be enabled by better train capacity, does she agree that the bigger reason that the Minister might want to consider is reduced traffic congestion? We have some of the most congested sections of motorway anywhere in the country, particularly the M60 ring road. The Highways Agency has been prevented from running its motorway widening scheme in those sections of the M60 as the air quality is too bad to tolerate any additional traffic. Motor traffic has nowhere to go, which adds to the powerful case she is making.

**Hazel Blears:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the wider economic issues for Eccles and the surrounding areas, which are extremely important. As the Minister knows, rail connectivity can often be a driver of regeneration. We have a particular problem

**26 Mar 2014 : Column 128WH**

with the housing shortage in this part of the Salford area. We have many applications for new housing but without proper transport links, including a rail link into the centre of Manchester, it is very difficult to satisfy those demands for housing development. I said that we have a number of big regeneration schemes coming on board and there are many applications for planning permissions to our local authority. Therefore, the economic case for having a decent rail service for commuters to get from Eccles into the centre of Manchester and home again in the evening is absolutely essential.

My hon. Friend has mentioned the issue of reducing congestion and emissions. Rail is a much more climate-friendly way to travel, as we all know. In fact, there has been a big push by Governments of all political opinions to get people off the roads and on to the rail service, which has been very successful. I think that there has been a 30% increase in the number of people travelling by rail in Greater Manchester, which has helped both the economy and in terms of emissions and the atmosphere.

There is an overwhelming case for the increase from an hourly service to a half-hourly service; as I have said, it is not too much to ask for. When the Minister responds, I hope that he can give me some hope that in the consultation for the 2016 franchise we will at last be able to get that service for local people. It meets the criteria that have been set out in TFGM’s assessment and it can now happen in a practical way, because of electrification and the changes to the timetable. If we are to achieve the economic benefits as well as improve the convenience of local people, it is absolutely essential that we put the half-hourly service into place. It is very rare that there is a situation where virtually every part of the system—the operators, TFGM, the local MPs and the local people—is saying that a change should happen, and therefore it cannot be beyond our wit to put that plan into practice.

I started this debate by saying that trains in Eccles have a proud history, as they do. The members of the Freccles campaign group have been working away on this issue for many years now and I want them to have some assurance that their campaigning, their commitment and the fact that they have given their own personal time to make this change happen and to improve the station in the way that they have will be rewarded with a decent service that they can rely on.

It is simple for the Minister. What do we want? We want two trains an hour. When do we want it? Before 2018. I hope that he is able to give us some assurance on that.

**4.52 pm**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill):** Thank you, Mr Davies, for calling me to speak. I also thank the right hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Hazel Blears) for securing this afternoon’s debate. My goodness, she is persuasive, isn’t she? She has raised a subject of interest to many of her constituents and others. I hope to address some of the points that she has raised.

The people of Eccles are served by a station that opened on the Liverpool and Manchester railway in September 1830—the world’s first major inter-city passenger railway. They have considerable pride in their local station, although we heard from the right hon. Lady

**26 Mar 2014 : Column 129WH**

about the tragic circumstances of the opening of the line. That local pride is demonstrated by the passion of the Friends of Eccles Station, which she has spoken about today.

By the way, I wonder whether George Stephenson had the same problems building his railway line as we are having building the High Speed 2 line. In Stephenson’s time, the major argument deployed against rail was, “Why do we need a railway when we have got the canals to use?”

**Hazel Blears:** I can help the Minister with that query. Apparently, Robert Stephenson had the same problems. He brought a Bill forward in the House of Commons; it was rejected; there was a revised Bill for a new alignment; and the revised alignment had a problem crossing Chat Moss, which was apparently a bottomless peat bog. I have no doubt that Stephenson faced exactly the same difficulties that the Minister might face in the future, but he persevered, had determination and got there in the end. I am sure that the Minister will want to do the same.

**Mr Goodwill:** “Plus ça change,” as I am tempted to say. I am told that only one thing is more difficult than building a new railway line: closing an existing one.

I welcome the investment made at Eccles station during 2013, which included a brand new ticket office building. That £235,000 project was funded by the national station improvement scheme, with contributions from TFGM and Salford City council. It provides a waiting area that offers much-improved facilities for passengers, and a raised section of platform—I am told it is called a “Harrington Hump”—has been provided on the eastbound platform. That will reduce the stepping distance from the platform to trains at Eccles, making it easier for people with reduced mobility or those with baggage or pushchairs to board trains to Manchester.

Northern Rail is installing a cycle hub at Eccles, which is due for completion next month. Having said all that, I understand that having a waiting room is no good if people have to wait too long for their train.

In July 2013, the Secretary of State for Transport unveiled a plaque at Eccles to commemorate the substantial completion of the first phase of electrification of the Liverpool and Manchester Chat Moss route. I commend the efforts of the volunteers who form the Friends of Eccles Station group, which has made such a contribution to improving the environment at Eccles station and promoting the benefits offered by the local railway, working with Northern Rail’s client and stakeholder manager and others.

Freccles, as we have to call the group, is just one of the groups of friends, station adopters and community rail partnerships made up of local people who volunteer their time and energy to improve their local stations and promote train services in the north of England.

**Barbara Keeley:** I did not want to let the Minister mention Freccles, an excellent group that does great work, without also mentioning Friends of Patricroft Station, a station near Eccles. That group is also campaigning for two trains an hour, as well as for the implementation of Sunday services. For some of these stations, a Sunday service would mean everything. It

**26 Mar 2014 : Column 130WH**

seems crazy to build up the numbers of passengers and the footfall during the week without having a Sunday service.

**Mr Goodwill:** It seems that there is not a friendless station in Lancashire. These volunteers who we have heard about make a considerable contribution at Eccles, other stations in the north and right across the Northern Rail network.

I am aware that Freccles wishes to see additional train services calling at both Eccles and Patricroft. The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who also mentioned air quality issues in a brief intervention earlier, wrote to the Secretary of State on this subject on 7 March.

I appreciate the view of Freccles that additional trains at Eccles could provide local people with a broader range of direct journey opportunities to Liverpool, Chester, north Wales and Manchester airport for work and leisure. That would make it easier for people to travel to work opportunities by train, including the opportunities at Manchester airport and the growing Media City in Salford.

Local train services at Eccles and Patricroft are sponsored and specified by TFGM, which is a co-signatory to the Northern Rail franchise agreement. The Government believe that TFGM, as the local transport authority, is well placed to decide how best to deliver local transport to serve new employment opportunities such as those at Media City, and to offer sustainable and convenient journeys that bring economic benefits and access to jobs and leisure, while helping to reduce carbon emissions from transport.

The railway industry has to develop services that best balance the competing needs and aspirations of all passengers within the capacity of the infrastructure and the funding available. A balance has to be struck between people making local journeys, who wish for trains to call at a number of stations, and other passengers making longer journeys, who are attracted to the train because it can offer a quick journey between main city centres. It is for train operators to decide, in partnership with TFGM, whether there is an appropriate business case for their existing train services to make additional calls at Patricroft and Eccles stations.

Although there may be little obvious cost in an existing express train stopping at those stations, operators have to consider whether the additional fare revenue from new passengers is likely to cover the increased use of fuel and other industry costs. There would also be an impact for existing passengers from extending journey times. By offering quick journey times, express trains offer people a competitive alternative to other modes of transport.

An additional station call would require changes to the timetable, as a station call typically adds two or three minutes to a train’s journey. At busy junctions around Manchester, slowing a train by only a few minutes could mean that it arrives at the same time as a train that is currently running behind it or one that crosses the junction in a conflicting move. The railway infrastructure around Manchester Piccadilly is used to full capacity at peak times. Additionally, train operators need to consider how busy their existing trains are. For example, would a greater number of passengers making short journeys on an existing train lead to those making longer journeys having to stand?

**26 Mar 2014 : Column 131WH**

**Hazel Blears:** I am listening carefully to the Minister, and I am afraid he is not giving me a great deal of hope—my heart is not fluttering and I do not feel that, after 10 years, we might be making some progress. These are exactly the same arguments that I have been pursuing for the past few years with Arriva and Northern, and they would not change the situation because of financial reasons. Then there were issues about the time scale, and about the two minutes here and there. I understand that those are all genuine matters, but TFGM said in its letter to me that it shares our frustration and wants to get two trains per hour at “the earliest opportunity” possible. It also says that the Department for Transport is launching the consultation.

I am afraid I am asking the Minister for more than his simply saying that the issue has nothing to do with the Department and it is all a local matter, because, clearly, he has overarching responsibility. I should like to hear from him that he agrees that we have an excellent business case for making sure that we get these trains.

**Mr Goodwill:** I am merely outlining the problems, although they are not insurmountable. A balance needs to be struck between the needs of the express passengers, who want a quick journey, and passengers who may wish to stop at intermediate stations.

Passenger demand on Northern services has increased by more than 40% since 2004 and its trains are now used by some 85 million passengers per year. In the same period, passenger numbers at Eccles have doubled, as they have on TransPennine Express services. Such increases in demand for trains and track capacity are among the reasons why the Government are investing over £500 million in the northern hub scheme over the next few years. That will increase capacity on the railway network serving Manchester and the cities of the north of England, enabling more trains to be operated in 2014, with further capacity improvement and more electrification due to come into use in 2016.

The right hon. Lady knows that Government investment in the railways of the north-west includes electrification of the lines between Liverpool and Manchester via Newton-le-Willows and Eccles, and from Liverpool to Wigan and Manchester to Preston and Blackpool North via Bolton. The first phase saw TransPennine Express introduce a fleet of 10 brand new four-coach electric trains between Manchester and Scotland, running via Wigan North Western. These entered service from 30 December 2013, with the full fleet now delivered.

From May 2014, TransPennine Express will provide additional carriages across its network, increasing overall capacity by 30%. That will include non-stop expresses between Liverpool and Manchester for the first time in several decades. These new train services will offer probably the fastest and most frequent express trains ever to run along the original Liverpool and Manchester railway.

Network Rail is nearing completion of the work for the next phase of electrification from Newton-Willows to Liverpool. Electric trains will be able to operate along the Chat Moss line from December. Some two years later, in late 2016, electric trains will be able to use the route from Manchester to Blackpool North via Bolton, too. That is all part of the Government’s massive electrification and investment project, providing more than 850 miles of electrification, which I probably do

**26 Mar 2014 : Column 132WH**

not need to remind the right hon. Lady is 842 miles more than delivered by the previous Labour Government in respect of improving our railways.

Although subject to reaching agreement, it is expected that a small number of train services between Liverpool and Manchester via the Chat Moss route will be provided using cascaded electric trains from the start of the December 2014 timetable. The planned phased introduction of four-coach electric trains will enable the operator to provide electric trains offering additional capacity for passengers travelling to Eccles and Patricroft during 2015.

**Hazel Blears:** I trust that the Minister will conduct the rest of this debate in the consensual way that has prevailed so far, otherwise I might be tempted to offer a different tone. Transport for Greater Manchester said:

“In the immediate short term, the major concern within TfGM is that the Department for Transport…has not confirmed when and how many electric units will come north to operate services over the newly electrified…line from this December.”

Will the Minister say how many are coming, to enable us to have that capacity?

**Mr Goodwill:** I will have to write to the right hon. Lady with precise details. I would not want to mislead the Chamber by giving the incorrect figure.

If agreed, it is hoped that the introduction of electric trains will enable a small number of the diesel trains used today to move to other routes. It is hoped that that will enable additional places to be provided for passengers travelling from Bolton and local stations on that line to Manchester at peak times, from the December 2014 timetable change.

Investment is being made on the Chat Moss route, to reinstate two tracks between Roby and Huyton that were removed in the 1970s. Initially, there will be a third track, but in a few years’ time, a new section of four-track railway will enable express trains to overtake local services, increasing capacity and reducing journey times.

In conclusion, we welcome the popularity of the railway in the north of England. Although I recognise that that has led to some services becoming very busy, the Government are investing to provide more, longer trains and to introduce electric trains and reduce journey times. I have outlined how the Government are working with operators and stakeholders to deliver increased capacity to the railway network, so that operators are able to provide passengers with more carriages and new, improved train services over the next few years. I hope to see electric trains calling at Eccles before the end of 2015, with operators working with TFGM and other local stakeholders to offer a more frequent service where there is a business case for doing so.

**Hazel Blears:** My heart fluttered a little when the Minister said “before the end of 2015”. Does that mean that he foresees the possibility, by the end of 2015, of two trains an hour—a half-hourly service—rather than the hourly service that we have now?

**Mr Goodwill:** The right hon. Lady mentioned this summer’s consultation and the opportunity that the new franchise may present. Let us hope that I have also seen that glimmer of hope, too, and let us hope that, in this case, it is not a false dawn.

**26 Mar 2014 : Column 133WH**

I thank the right hon. Lady again for bringing this matter to my attention. If enthusiasm was a way of getting this matter pushed through, she would certainly have the train already. I appreciate that it is difficult for people to plan their lives around a train service that runs only on the hour. I have a similar problem with the Northern Rail service to Whitby in my constituency, where there is also a campaign for a second train, to give us an early morning service. The problems faced in Eccles are not confined to the western side of the country; they are also encountered in my constituency.

**26 Mar 2014 : Column 134WH**

I appreciate the opportunity to make the case and to respond to the right hon. Lady’s points, and I look forward to seeing what developments come in future.