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New sensor technology at Britain's biggest and busiest stations has revealed tens of millions of people a year are visiting them to shop, eat and drink, in addition to those who travel by rail. The new data coincides with Network Rail's latest quarterly retail sales figures, showing a healthy 5.6% growth in like-for-like sales from January to March 2014, well above reported high street growth of 0.5% during the same period. On an annualised basis, Network Rail station retailers reported like-for-like sales growth of 6.1% while high street sales reached just 0.75%.

The trading figures were compiled from the sales results of retailers operating from over 500,000 sq ft of retail space across 16 of Britain's biggest and busiest stations owned and operated by Network Rail, and benefiting from a combined annual footfall of over 1bn.

Top performing stations include King's Cross (+23.3%), followed by Cannon Street (+21.3%) and Manchester Piccadilly (+8.4%) when compared to the same period last year. Specialist Food brands performed best in stations during this period (+22.5%), followed closely by Cards & Stationery (+14.9%) and Pubs & Bars (+12.6%).

Hamish Kiernan, commercial director of retail, Network Rail, said: "These are great results for our retailers and we are delighted that our stations are continuing to give them an edge over the high street. We know that the growing appetite for rail travel and convenience of our locations are key drivers of this trend, and we will continue to capitalise on this by creating 'must-visit' retail destinations across our portfolio of stations. Income from retail is a vital funding stream for Network Rail and strong results will allow us to deliver even greater value for Britain."

Stations are lucrative trading environments for all types of retailers and as new stats show, the facilities are attracting people who aren't necessarily travelling at that time.

Footfall data from recently installed sensor technology at 15 of the country's biggest stations uncovers with much greater accuracy how many people enter stations to shop, eat and drink, work, or use connected transport services without taking the train.

London's Liverpool Street station recorded 91m people entering the station over the last 40 weeks and this is expected to increase to 119m for the full year – twice the amount of rail ticket sales recorded over an annual period³. Outside of London the picture remains the same, with 10m more people entering the station at Birmingham New Street, 5.6m more at Manchester Piccadilly and 6m more at Edinburgh Waverley.

The footfall data, which is now available on Network Rail's transparency portal, enables Network Rail and its retail partners to better understand the flow of people through the station and areas of busiest or least activity. It also helps them to safely manage people through the stations and can inform redevelopments, such as the Waterloo retail balcony which moved retail away from the cluttered concourse to free up space for both shoppers and commuters.

David Sturdy, managing director of PFM Footfall Intelligence, who supplied and now maintain the footfall system, said: "we were very excited to be given this fantastic opportunity to work with Network Rail on this project. It has been very challenging due to the exacting requirements for installation in a station environment but through close co-operation with the client, we developed a very efficient working partnership. I am glad to see, from the figures being quoted, that the project is delivering the return on investment that was originally envisaged by Network Rail"

All profits from Network Rail's commercial activity are re-invested in the railway to help build a safer, more reliable and growing network for its passengers and freight users.