

Letter to Health and Education Minister's

I am writing on behalf of The Society of Shoe Fitters (a not-for-profit organisation), in an effort to make you aware of the situation regarding footwear and foot health in this country; which you may not be aware is costing the taxpayer considerably in remedial care and G.P./hospital visits. With the number of independent shoe retailers closing on a weekly basis – some of whom have been around two and three generations, the feet of this country are more at risk now than they have been for the past 100 years.

Footwear is viewed incorrectly as an accessory rather than a necessity, but is in fact the only item of clothing that can serious damage your health in the long term. Ill fitting footwear affects your entire physiology and many leg, hip, back and neck pains can be attributed to ill fitting footwear. Think about the working man-hours lost on a daily basis by those in pain too. If your shoes do not fit correctly and your feet hurt you walk differently to counteract the pain, which in turn throws out and puts pressure on other joints in the body, and for older people it will often deter them from remaining mobile. Like the clothing industry there is no standardisation of sizing in footwear (which is good as no two pairs of feet are the same), there is no such thing as a standard shaped foot. Six different styles of shoe all in a child's size 10F will not fit the foot the same – strange but true. The only way to ensure the correct style and size is purchased and worn is from having the shoes fitted by a qualified shoe fitter.

Children's feet are the most vulnerable as they are growing and developing, therefore damage caused in a child's early years will stay with them and become progressively worse as they get older. It is vital that a child has shoes are fitted professionally as a qualified shoe fitter can spot any potential problem occurring and advise the parent accordingly to prevent long term damage. What is happening now is that parents are unaware of the potential problems shoes can cause, and simply buying cheap fashion items that they have fitted themselves.

The 26 bones in the foot do not ossify (fully form and harden) until around the age of 16-18 and therefore any restriction, rubbing etc. will change the anatomical structure of the foot which has a knock-on effect for your long term health. This is just for a normally healthy foot accounting for merely a third of the population – many people suffer with chronic conditions like Diabetes, Arthritis, Rheumatism etc. which affect the feet and need very special care when being fitted. How many people realise that all feet spread as we get older due to muscles and tendons which stretch and relax as we age? How many know that women's feet tend to spread more due to the consequences of childbirth and can go up or even down a size? It is reported that over 90% of women are wearing the wrong sized footwear and the result of this will be bunions, hammer toes and other skeletal foot deformities requiring medical support.

Shoe fitting should be considered throughout our lifetime as feet do not remain static in shape and size and the elderly have a very difficult task of finding shoes on the High Street to fit their misshapen feet and rely heavily on independent retailers who will bother to stock footwear suitable for this age group.

Things changed beyond all recognition due to the closure of U.K. factories in favour of overseas factories and this has had a knock-on effect all the way down to our retail base. The expertise, knowledge and skill base was vast and stretched over numerous labour intensive businesses, from tanneries and last-makers to buckle-makers and component parts, all of which have a bearing on how a shoe fits. The massive importation of cheap, foreign, ill-constructed footwear for chainstores, the Internet, and the introduction of footwear sales in supermarkets, has been a nail in the shoe trade coffin and this has had a detrimental affect to the way shoes are sold – without any skill or advice, which is so important to our overall health.

Independent shops that specialise in footwear generally offer a knowledgeable and often qualified staff. They have been pushed off the High Street into secondary positions by large multi-nationals but continued to maintain a loyal customer base that saw generations of a family buying their footwear as the staff would know the history of their feet. However with supermarkets selling shoes and worse still the internet, the public are unaware how this will affect them adversely as there are no public health warnings or guidelines informing them of the danger of ill fitting, self fitted footwear – and this is something an independent retailer did and still does on a daily basis – not to frighten people, but to simply protect their feet. The public wrongly assume that anyone working in a shoe shop has to know about feet and footwear (as they are in Germany) and that unsuitable footwear would not be allowed

to be sold.....wrong! They believe that shoes are made in standard sizes and therefore a certain size will fit them and there are no alternatives to a certain size....wrong! But how can they possibly know without the right guidance and education? If businesses are allowed to sell 'shoe gauges' directly to the public (which should be prohibited as they are merely a guide, a starting point to a qualified fitter), it is like handing the keys to a Ferrari to a learner driver!

With the demise of the independent retailer and companies like Clarks and Start-rite known as Fitting Specialists being forced to compete by selling online, the number of Qualified Shoe Fitters has started to dwindle – and the situation is now critical. The financial restrictions placed on those who are struggling to trade in these difficult times have made it almost impossible for an independent to compete with mass market retailers or invest in the education of their staff and therefore the free knowledge and skill of professional shoe fitters is at risk. If the public ignorantly continue to buy cheaply made, self-fitted footwear without any expert advice (as we have said, vital for young parents, children and the elderly all of whom NEED guidance albeit unaware of its importance), it is storing up medical conditions requiring treatment by the N.H.S. An orthotic or in more severe cases surgery is very costly. Surely it makes sense to support preventative care rather than remedial? It speaks volumes when you are aware that the number of Chiropodists/Podiatrists has risen to over 11,000 in this country.

The Society of Shoe Fitters has trained thousands of retail staff to fit shoes correctly and currently has 250 practising members, of which over 90% fit children's footwear only. For the past 55 years the S.S.F. has provided the only professionally recognised course for shoe fitting in the U.K. It has trained many thousands of independent retailers as well as "trainers" for the likes of Start-rite and Clarks. The income from our training and membership has allowed us to remain self-supporting and able to provide a FREE Advice Line, Information Website and Foot Health Education Material for the industry and public, often referred to by health professionals. Despite our hard-work and financial independence helping thousands of people over the years we are losing the battle, we need your help to put into place some basic retail guidelines relating purely to footwear to educate the public. Both Independent Retailers and The Society of Shoe Fitters need support from the Government both in terms of education and health; we can no longer do it alone and we need it NOW.

- Any website selling children's footwear should be made to carry a prominent Government Health Warning on its homepage (Keep Feet 'Fit', children's feet should be professionally measured and fitted) – and this can be policed by Trading Standards and fined accordingly.
- A national advertising campaign is needed and the SSF should receive a promotional health education budget to promote foot health and buying footwear safely.
- Health Education Practitioners should be made aware of the importance of ill fitting footwear.
- Any retail outlet selling children's footwear should have at least one Qualified Shoe Fitter on the premises, and/or a contribution to training given to retailers to do so.

By simple education and media awareness of the issues relating to ill fitting footwear the general public would be far more aware of the issues relating to off the shelf purchases of footwear and the importance of having feet measured at regular intervals, you will be doing the great British Public, N.H.S. and footwear industry, a tremendous service.

Shoes and websites should carry a Government Health Warning with every pair – Children's Shoes should be fitted professionally! Simple.

We urge you to consider the information we have presented to you and look forward to your response as to how we can work together to highlight the detrimental effect that the lack of incorrectly fitted footwear has on the nation and how we can give Independent Retailers greater support in providing the public with a much needed fitting service.