



**PROPOSAL TO RETAIN
FORT PRIMARY SCHOOL AND MERGE WITH
VICTORIA PARK CHILD AND FAMILY CENTRE**

Affecting Fort Community Wing and Fort Nursery

Final document - October 2009

**Fighting for Fort – MORE than just a
school**

<http://www.fightingfort.wordpress.com>

Proposal to maintain Fort Primary and create Fort Early Years Centre

1. Introduction & Context

1.1 This proposal document sets out the rationale and implications in respect of the proposal by the Fighting for Fort committee to maintain Fort Primary School while reducing spare capacity and creating the Fort Early Years Centre.

1.2 This paper also contains our questions and comments on the proposal to close Fort Primary by Edinburgh Council.

Format of Proposal Document

1.3 The proposal document is divided into the following sections:

- 1 Introduction & Context
- 2 Questions and Comments Arising from The Council's Proposal
 - Educational Benefits Statement
 - Implications of Primary School Proposals
 - Community Considerations
 - Financial Considerations
- 3 Our Proposal
- 4 Fort Primary School – Case for Retaining
- 5 Timescales
- 6 Conclusions and Key Implications

Appendix 1 2004 plans to move school into Main Building only, Citadel to use Infant Building

Appendix 2 References

Appendix 3 Testimonials from parents and children

1.4 We accept that Edinburgh Council is trying to ensure that the school estate provides best value for money, and that they are under growing financial pressures to do so. However, as parents and interested members of the local community we feel very strongly that there must be a balance between cost-efficiency and quality of education.

1.5 There have been twelve primary schools closed in the last ten years but Edinburgh Council still feels that there are too many “surplus” places. The main problem is that across the city there are “popular” schools experiencing overcrowding while the “less popular” schools lose children from their catchment areas into these already overcrowded schools. This further perpetuates the reputations of both over- and under-capacity schools.

1.6 While the primary school-aged population has fallen since 1997, projections by both the General Registrar Office for Scotland and Edinburgh Council's Housing Department are that it is set to rise through an increase in the birth rate in recent years and through new housing, particularly in the Fort catchment area. Forth Ports are reporting that the building of new housing is set to resume much earlier than projected at the start of the recent economic downturn. Much of this new housing will be within Fort's catchment area.

1.7 This paper questions the Council's statement that an amalgamation with Trinity Primary School will be of educational benefit to all pupils concerned, and provides evidence to the contrary.

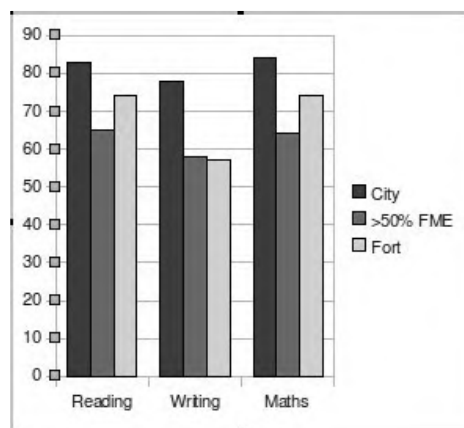
1.8 This paper questions the financial savings that the Council suggests will be made

under its proposal to close Fort Primary and puts forward an alternative proposal with the same capital receipts and lower immediate expenditure.

1.9 This paper details the proposal to maintain Fort Primary School in the Main Building at Fort to allow the Council's proposal to relocate Victoria Park Child and Family Centre in the Infant Wing.

2. Questions and Comments Arising from The Council's Proposal

2.1 Edinburgh Council's consultation paper and other related documents refer to educational attainment at Fort Primary School being 10% below the city average for reading and maths and 20% below for writing. The purpose of attainment figures is to allow similar schools to be compared – which means using the city average for comparison is an inaccurate reflection. Fort Primary School should be compared with the average of schools with a similar socio-economic background. The accepted measure of this is the percentage of children with Free Meal Entitlement (FME). Fort has the highest FME in the city at 76%. To work out the average we used the eighteen schools in Edinburgh with FME of 50% or greater. Using this figure, Fort is 10% above the average of similar schools in reading and maths and only 1% below average for writing (a figure which had improved since 2005 but which had dipped in 2008). Attainment at Fort has improved dramatically over the last five years, with writing improving 100%, reading by 75% and maths by 50%.



2.2 Fort Primary School currently has Positive Action Status – part of the reason why the per pupil costs are higher than average. *The Smart Schools Initiative: The Primary School Estate – February 2004* report states that schools with Positive Action Status should not be expected to achieve more than around 83% occupancy because its purpose is to reduce class sizes and increase staff:pupil ratios. Edinburgh Council maintains that the occupancy at Fort is “the lowest in the city” at 33%. However, if our notional capacity is reduced to 83% then we are at 40% occupancy, which is still quite low but not deserving of such emotive language.

2.3 Educational Attainment at Trinity is higher than it is at Fort. This is not a reflection on the standard of teaching at Fort; it is a result of the socio-economic background of the pupils at each school. Fort also has a relatively high percentage of children with Additional Support Needs. The smaller class sizes and higher staff ratios mean that children with additional needs receive the best possible education at a very individual level – something which is hard to provide in a school at 96% capacity with a lower staff:pupil ratio. It does not follow that by moving from Fort Primary to Trinity Primary, Fort's children would suddenly attain at Trinity's average levels. Going to a different school does not change the socio-economic background of the children, nor does it address Additional Support Needs – if anything, moving to a more overcrowded school would be detrimental to these children.

2.4 The suitability of the accommodation at Trinity Primary School is assessed by Edinburgh Council as “good”. However, Trinity is already short of space for their after school club – a number of children have to use the after school provision at Victoria Primary School. Fort provides a number of funded after school club places to children for a

variety of reasons. The restriction on numbers for after school care at Trinity is due to a lack of physical space, something that isn't going to be improved by increasing the school from 79% occupancy to 96%. At the time of writing we are still waiting to hear from the Director of Children and Families to arrange a meeting to discuss ideas for the provision of adequate after school care should the Council's proposal go ahead.

2.5 Edinburgh Council believes that to deliver the best education, children should be in classes of 30 or 33 (25 for P1) in schools where every available teaching space is a classroom. By contrast, parents, staff and the SNP Government believe that smaller class sizes and multi-purpose space are essential for a good, modern education. The Curriculum for Excellence requires that children have “break-out” spaces where they can work on interdisciplinary projects in small groups or on their own initiative. How is this to be possible in a school converted from the fourteen classrooms it was built with to one with a fifteenth classroom squeezed in to allow more than the building's original planned capacity to be crammed in? How will the SNP Government's vision of P1-3 classes with no more than eighteen pupils ever come to fruition if Edinburgh Council's plan goes ahead? Other Scottish councils are working hard to reduce class sizes, where Edinburgh seems to be putting as much effort into increasing them. This proposal alone would create a single P1 class of 39 children – more than double the Government's target.

2.6 Councils are saying they can't afford to implement the Curriculum for Excellence citing the need for more teachers, more space, more time to prepare... Yet at schools like Fort, the Curriculum for Excellence is already underway because it is similar to the way the school was working to begin with. Smaller class sizes mean children are much more able to receive a personal education tailored to their specific needs. It's plain common sense. And use of non-classroom spaces, such as libraries, IT suites and project rooms are vital to the concept of “interdisciplinary learning” and of course, Edinburgh Council's catchphrase of the moment, “Getting it Right for Every Child”. Under the Curriculum for Excellence we absolutely agree with a senior teacher from a primary school in Moray who recommends that schools should be at no more than 75% occupancy to allow for “break-out space” - Trinity's current occupancy is 79%.

2.7 The Council's consultation document states: “Early projection work based on the new Trinity roll has identified potential staffing increases of 5.75 full time equivalent (fte) teaching staff, a second depute head teacher profile, 0.24fte extra clerical assistance, enhanced administration assistance and 1fte classroom assistant.” Only one classroom assistant? At Fort the children have at least one teacher and one full time classroom assistant per class. Currently there are 8 fte teachers and 5fte classroom assistants. We understand they would be re-deployed – but where? There is already a glut of teachers in Edinburgh, and new teachers finishing their probationary year are extremely unlikely to be able to secure a teaching post in the city. The extra funding for staffing at Fort is to increase the level of 1:1 support available. A move to Trinity would be a devastating change for Fort Children – not only to suddenly be in a class of 30 or 33 (or 39 in the case of one of the P1 classes) but to have a reduced number of staff involved in the class. Fort pupils currently have a teacher:pupil ratio of 1:18, which is higher than the Scottish average of 1:17. A merger with Trinity would result in a ratio of 1:25, so Fort children would suffer a considerable reduction in staff contact – the equivalent of a loss of nearly one teacher in three.

2.8 The Council's document makes no mention of Support for Learning teachers. Trinity has one SFL teacher three days a week for around 350 pupils. Fort has one full time and one part time SFL teacher, with less than a third of the number of pupils, which means

there is ten times as much SFL provision at Fort. For Trinity to accommodate Fort children the SFL base must be turned into a full time classroom, with SFL moving into a smaller space. A minimum of two fte SFL teachers would be required to maintain the current provision and this could result in learning support being carried out in corridors because of lack of space. This is an issue which greatly concerns us.

2.9 While team teaching is possible, it is not the most desirable environment for establishing good literacy skills. If Fort were to be merged with Trinity, then the children would be accommodated, but in many areas of the school staff and pupils will find themselves having to “make do” in a reduced space with reduced facilities. Do we really want to force our children into a situation where they have to “make do” during the formative years of their education? Team teaching happens in a few primary schools in Edinburgh, and while Council officials may claim that these overcrowded schools are exceptional educational establishments bursting at the seams with happy children, this is not necessarily a view shared by the parents of these children or the children themselves.

2.10 Fort Community Wing runs several after-school groups. The remit of the Community Learning and Development worker is to engage with children (and young people and adults) in the local community. These clubs start straight after school. This will not be practical if there is no longer a school, meaning the entire youth programme would have to be reconsidered. It can be hard enough to engage with children and young people, but if they have to travel to get to the Wing rather than go into it from within the school grounds, many of them (possibly the ones in most need of the service) won't bother. This will have a severe impact on the future of the Wing, the hub of our local community.

2.11 The Council states that there are no significant road safety issues in the routes from the existing Fort catchment to Trinity Primary School, and point out that there are already around 34 children who make that journey. What the Council hasn't taken into consideration is the number of side roads along Ferry Road that would need to be crossed – roads which are used as rat runs by rush hour drivers trying to avoid the traffic lights at the junction of Ferry Road and Newhaven Road. These roads lead through to the other route identified by the Council, the Dudleys. If children take the long way round there will be no roads to cross, but children travelling by themselves will not take the safe route over the quickest route, especially in bad weather. There are many young children who currently bring themselves to school at Fort, and we have no reason to believe that would change if they were to be travelling further along main roads to Trinity. In addition, access to these roads through the Dudleys is via a narrow, poorly lit alleyway which is an unpleasant-enough place to walk through in dark mornings and afternoons as an adult, never mind as an unaccompanied child. Also of note is that Fort is on a quiet, traffic-calmed road with a permanent 20mph speed limit. Trinity is on a busier road which is also a bus route, and which only has a temporary 20mph speed limit at school travelling times.

2.12 The Council's consultation document states that its proposal to close Fort Primary and move all the children to Trinity Primary, move Victoria Park Child and Family Centre to the infant building at Fort and convert the rest of Fort School to offices will cost only £30,000 to implement (a figure that mysteriously and quietly doubled from the original £15,000 in the Council's proposal document). This figure is only to create a fifteenth classroom at Trinity Primary School and add doorways from the corridor to the project rooms. The cost of converting the infant classes into rooms suitable for babies and toddlers from Victoria Park has been valued at £133,000; nowhere in the Council's document does it mention the costs of converting the rest of the classrooms into offices, with a view to converting them back to classrooms in a few years when the rising

population means that both Trinity and Victoria primary schools are full.

2.13 The Council's proposal to make revenue savings by moving office staff to the Fort School building makes no mention of where these staff would go when Fort is re-opened as a school.

2.14 Whether or not the building is retained as a school during this short time of lower pupil numbers, the maintenance work valued by the Council at £652,944 will still have to be carried out. If the building is to be mothballed during this temporary closure, the security costs could well outweigh any savings. The security at Bonnington Primary School is reported to be costing the Council £75,000. Fort, as a single storey building with an accessible flat roof, may well have a higher security cost. If the school is to be converted to offices then considerable additional security would be required to protect such things as IT equipment.

3. Our Proposal

3.1 In 2004 plans were drawn up in accordance with a proposal to move the infant classes at Fort Primary School in the Main Building, to retain the Nursery in the Infant Wing, and to use the remaining rooms in the Infant Wing for the Citadel Youth Centre. The Citadel now have their own premises, but these plans could easily be adopted under our proposal with Victoria Park Child and Family Centre taking over the space originally identified for the Citadel (see Appendix 1).

3.2 We propose that:

- **Fort Primary School remains in its current location but reduces its capacity by using only the Main Building, thereby reducing the overall surplus places in the area and city while retaining sufficient spare capacity for the projected population growth.**
- **Victoria Park Child and Family Centre would relocate to create the new Fort Early Years Centre in the Infant Wing alongside Fort Nursery.**
- **Fort Community Wing would continue to deliver its community programme with full use of the school building.**
- **The excellent links between the Nursery and the school, and the local community would continue.**

3.3 The current notional capacity of Fort Primary School is 279. As a single-stream school its notional capacity would be 199 which is a reduction of 80 spare places, and would increase Fort's current occupancy to 46%. While this is still quite low, the Council predicts an increase of around 150 primary school-aged children in the local area in the next few years, and with the new class size legislation and closer links with Victoria Park Child and Family Centre, the P1 intake at Fort should steadily increase from next year.

3.4 Victoria Park Child and Family Centre already has good links with Fort Primary School with many children coming to Fort from Victoria Park, and many school and nursery pupils having younger siblings at Victoria Park. In addition, a drop-in group for parents and carers which is facilitated by staff from Victoria Park and Pilrig Child and Family Centres runs in the Family Room at Fort Primary School on a Wednesday afternoon.

3.5 Under our proposal, Edinburgh Council would still be able to sell the Victoria Park building and so achieve the planned capital receipts. The land proposed to be transferred to Trinity Primary School will still provide much-needed additional school grounds.

3.6 We have concerns under the Council's proposal to close Fort Primary School that both the Community Wing and the Nursery would be adversely affected. Our proposal ensures that the Community Wing's Youth Programme is maintained and that the excellent links between the Nursery and the school – for children, parents and staff – continue to provide a nurturing, supportive and consistent learning environment.

3.7 Our proposal incurs no additional costs over the Council's proposal, with savings on the required building works at Trinity Primary School. The cost of transferring Victoria Park Child and Family Centre to the Fort infant building to create the Fort Early Years Centre would remain the same. There would be no cost involved in moving Fort Primary School into the one remaining building. Capital receipts would remain the same with the sale of the Victoria Park building.

4. Fort Primary School – Case for Retaining

4.1 Much has been said by the Council on the educational benefit to Fort children by moving to a school with a higher attainment, but so far no formal evidence has been provided. We submit the results of two major academic studies on class size, socio-economic background and attainment, carried out by London University's Institute of Education and the STAR project in the USA. Both found that smaller class sizes make a significant difference to Early Years education in areas of deprivation. The Class Sizes, Staffing and Resources Working Group Final Report, which drew on these reports and others, acknowledged that children from deprived backgrounds should be in a class size of less than 20 in their initial year if they are to benefit from the clear effect that class size makes to academic attainment. Evidence also suggests that where children are moved into larger classes after P1 any benefit they have had from a smaller class is lost. Several studies suggest that smaller class sizes allow staff to devote more time to pupils' individual learning needs, and suggest that there is a reduction in anti-social behaviour as a result.

4.2 Building work looks set to resume far sooner than the original predictions at the start of the recent economic downturn, with the next phase of building likely to be parallel to Commercial Street to tie in with the new tram network. Much of this is within Fort's catchment, and while the Council document states that the new developments are to be mostly one-bedroom executive flats, there will also be a lot of family-suitable housing. In the existing "executive apartments" there are an increasing number of children. Some of these are covered by Victoria Primary School's catchment area with the rest being in Fort's catchment area. Victoria Primary School already has a high occupancy rate, being a single stream Victorian school recently reassessed down to a notional capacity of only six classes from seven. Victoria Primary is currently at 89% occupancy with a small P7 of eleven children. If they have another P1 intake next year of 24 then there will only be three spare places at this school. If Fort is merged with Trinity this would result in the three remaining cluster schools having occupancies of: Victoria – 98%; Trinity/Fort – 96%; Wardie – 98%. This is not an ideal situation with a projected increase in primary school-aged children of 150 within a few years.

4.3 The Council accepts that spare capacity needs to be retained in the area. Victoria and Trinity Primaries have little available space left, Fort is the only school with the spare capacity to accommodate the majority of the expected rise in school-aged children. The Council's document is inconsistent in its projections of when this spare capacity would be required, but figures obtained by Trinity Parent Council, and available in their report, suggest Fort would need to be re-opened in 2012, or 2013 meaning only a year or two of

savings for all the harm and disruption caused. We question the commitment to our children's education that the Council is willing to temporarily move an entire school for the sake of a small financial saving.

4.4 The primary school population could be better distributed between the three schools, and while we of course support parental choice (many of us live in the Trinity catchment area and have chosen Fort for our children), the Council still has a duty to create and maintain the balance of class sizes, school rolls and placing requests. We would hope that by creating the Fort Early Years Centre, more children will go on to enroll at Fort Primary School. This will be dependent on the successful promotion of the school to pre-school parents, something which has been very difficult in recent years with the threat of closure hanging over us.

4.5 The building and playground at Fort Primary School provide an excellent learning environment. The playground is one of the best in the city, covering a large area which includes a football pitch, grass areas, wooded areas, a willow bower and extensive areas of tarmac with the usual painted-on games. The building is single-level meaning it is fully accessible, and built in a way which means each pair of classrooms have their own entrance and toilets. In the event of an emergency evacuation children do not have to make their way along crowded corridors, down flights of stairs and through a single doorway. Day-to-day it means that children can move about between the courtyard, library, IT and French rooms, gym hall, and outside for excursions without disturbing other classes.

4.6 Having additional space within a school means the ability to have dedicated rooms for specific purposes. One of the rooms at Fort is used to provide play therapy for children with specific needs and their families. It is also used as a chill-out area for children arriving at school under emotional stress to allow them time to become ready to join their class without becoming disruptive. We welcome proposals for a time-out system in Edinburgh schools for children feeling under pressure to take time out of the classroom. At Fort they have a specific place to go, and an available member of staff to accompany them. Where would they go at Trinity?

4.7 Fort provides a play therapy service using a visiting volunteer play therapist. The therapist is now retiring so the school and the Parent Council have been working with the Multi-Cultural Family Base to plan and provide a new family therapy service which will hopefully be able to help more children than we have been able to in the past. Fort's catchment makes this service absolutely essential, but it is only because of the available space and the Positive Action Status funding that it can exist.

4.8 Fort Primary School has links with the Nursery, Community Wing and the local community. There are many opportunities for parents to be involved in both the Nursery and the School, something which is a very important part of the Curriculum for Excellence. Parents are encouraged by the Nursery to come in and work with their children on art projects and to come on trips out to the park and to attractions in the city. Family Learning are also involved in the school and nursery, with parents having the opportunity to work on projects for themselves and for their children, and to take part in activities such as storytelling and craft sessions within the school and at local events. There are a number of parents with children at Fort who need support with their own literacy, whether because of their own difficulties at school or because English is not their first language. Family Learning supports these parents to help with their children's education but is only able to do so because of available rooms within Fort School. Trinity Primary School does not have

the space for a Family Learning worker to engage with parents, so this additional support would be lost to people who are in real need of it.

4.9 The Council supports parental choice in deciding to which school we send our children. In choosing Fort we are choosing a school with extensive playground space, small class sizes and good staff numbers; the school our children have become familiar with during their time at the nursery here. If Fort is closed and the children moved to Trinity then there is no longer the option of a school with these benefits. Parents then only have the option of a multi-storey Victorian school with a very small playground or a 1960s school similar in design to Fort, but built over three levels, with a small playground and 96% occupancy.

4.10 Fort Nursery recently had a good Care Commission inspection, which noted the effectiveness of the transition between the nursery and the school. It also described the nursery as “well managed” by the school headteacher. If the school were to move to Trinity then the nursery would no longer have that management structure or the benefits to staff of being part of a larger educational establishment. It would be particularly difficult for the teaching staff who are currently able to move between the nursery and the school, including staff who split their hours between the nursery and the school. The impact on the children would be far, far greater. Children in the full-time nursery at the back of the building have an outdoor play area adjoining the main school playground. This means that the children are used to seeing the older children playing at break and lunchtime, and can keep close links with the Primary 1 class, which is largely made up of their friends from nursery. Children in both nursery classes and their parents/carers benefit from an extensive programme of transition events. Towards the end of their pre-school year, visits to the P1/2 classroom, activity sessions in the classroom, playground and gym hall with the children and staff from P1 and craft and information sessions for the parents are arranged. Such a high level of dedication to ensuring worry-free transition doesn't exist for children moving on to other schools because it is just not practical. All this would be lost if the nursery was no longer part of the school.

4.11 The loss of the Community Wing as a part of the school would affect the children, their parents/carers and the Community Wing itself. It is a vital component of the school and local community, a place where parents can pop in for information and advice, including access to Working Links, EAL classes and CLD courses, or for the Fort Food Co-op and coffee social after dropping their child off at school. There are several after-school groups that run, including Fort Fun Sports which provides an hour of literacy-focused activity for P1-3 children. These would not be able to run in their current format if the school is moved away from the Community Wing, and it's likely most would be lost completely. Several new clubs planned to start this year are at risk of being abandoned, and have already been delayed by the uncertainty over the school's future.

5. Timescales

5.1 If this proposal is accepted then the school would complete the 2009/10 session as it stands, and would return in August 2010 to the smaller single-building Fort Primary School. No building work is required for the relocation of the infant classes, just for the classroom furniture to be moved over to the main building and into the allocated classrooms. There is sufficient space to do so.

5.2 Victoria Park would be relocated once the necessary building adaptations were completed.

6. Conclusions and Key Implications

6.1 Fort Primary School is at the heart of a local community going through change because of regeneration and development. It is providing stability for children and their families during a time of uncertainty over local housing, particularly the relocation of residents of Fort House. A significant factor in the low school roll at Fort has been the reduction in families within the catchment area as Fort House is emptying prior to its demolition in 2010. New housing is to be built on the site, although there is likely to be a delay because of the economic situation and developers concentrating on land close to the tram network. However, much of this land is also within Fort's catchment.

6.2 Staffing and servicing costs under our proposal will be lower than the current level, but will still be above the Edinburgh average. This is due in large part to Fort's Positive Action Status which provides extra funding for staffing and to reduce class sizes, (so) Fort could never be expected to cost the same or less than an "average" Edinburgh school.

6.3 Building maintenance will have to be carried out regardless of the outcome of the Council's proposals.

6.4 The Council states that Trinity Primary School has sufficient spare capacity, but both Trinity Parent Council and the Fighting for Fort committee dispute this. While it is physically possible to fit the number of children Edinburgh Council is proposing into the Trinity building, we, as parents, are extremely concerned that the quality of our children's education would be drastically reduced as a result of overcrowding.

6.5 The proposed overcrowding at Trinity Primary School is a direct contradiction of the SNP Government's guidelines on reducing class sizes, and would make the implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence very difficult. Education has come a long way from the days of children spending their days sitting in a classroom, but at Trinity under the Council's proposals there won't be enough space to do anything else, including children eating packed lunches at their desks as is already happening at Trinity.

6.6 We are concerned about the lack of opportunity for parental involvement under the Council's proposals, especially the loss of Family Learning and the Fort Drop-In group. These things are only possible because there is space available at Fort Primary School to hold groups for parents. Until now, Fort has been described as "very lucky" to have the use of this extra space. Consequently, we would describe an overcrowded Trinity as "very unlucky" not to have the opportunities that Fort has had.

6.7 Our proposals will mean an immediate reduction in some spare places at Fort Primary School and in the Leith area, and there will be upwards of 90 places still available to accommodate future population increases. While this means a current occupancy lower than the Council would like, we feel that there is not enough of a financial reason to temporarily close the school and to justify putting our children through the emotional and physical upheaval of being moved to another school. Academic evidence strongly suggests such a move will be detrimental to their education.

6.8 The education of our children is one of the most important things that we, as a society, can provide. It should not be compromised for the sake of limited financial savings. While we understand and agree that the Council has to make savings at this time of global financial crisis, it should not be at the expense of our children's education.

Appendix 2 – References

University of London Institute of Education Class Size Research Project (2008)
<http://www.classsizeresearch.org.uk/>

Project STAR (1999) <http://www.heros-inc.org/star.htm>

Class sizes, Staffing and Resources Working Group: Final Proposal (2007)
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/11/16094326/8>

The Early Years Framework: Learning Together: Positive Start, Positive Outcomes (2008)
<http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/eyfltpspo-02.html>

Appendix 3 – Testimonials from parents and children

My son started at Fort Nursery in February of 2005, when we moved to Edinburgh from England after I separated from my husband. At the time, my son had severe speech difficulties, but the staff and children at Fort immediately made him feel welcome and confident, despite the fact that he was very difficult to understand.

When it came to him moving up to Primary one, I had a very easy choice – to go to my catchment school (not Fort Primary) where there was classes of 30 children and my son knew very few children, or stay at Fort Primary, where he went into a class of 20 children, all of whom knew him, could understand his language and where he felt comfortable. He had a teacher and a classroom assistant, both of whom knew him already too. The transition from Nursery was very well managed, and, having had a full-time nursery place in his pre-school year due to his speech, he moved effortlessly into Primary 1. He continued having his speech therapy in school during his first year, and was never made to feel that he was any different from anyone else.

Due, I think, to his teachers and extra support, he was signed off from the speech therapist at the end of Primary 2. He is now in Primary 4, and has progressed brilliantly. He even took part in a story-telling competition at the end of Primary 3 – something which I would have thought impossible before he started school. I am in no doubt that I made the right decision in keeping him at Fort Primary. He continues to love the school, its grounds, his friends and his teachers.

On a personal level, when I moved to Edinburgh having left my husband, I knew nobody in Edinburgh. Thanks to the social nature of the Nursery at Fort, and the Family Learning projects done at the school (of which I've done many!), I now have a circle of close, supportive and valuable friends. It also led me to be involved with Fort Community Wing where I volunteered at the local Food Co-op, and attended different courses. Fort Primary School, the Nursery and the Community Wing really do form a close-knit community, on which lots of people depend. It certainly helped me to get through a very difficult time in my life, and I would not want to imagine life without it.

When I first moved to Leith my eldest daughter had just turned three. I had registered her at Fort Nursery over the phone, and had never visited the school until the day she started. Her nursery teacher and the nursery nurse were very welcoming and reassuring. She settled in very quickly. Not long after she started, the headteacher of the school held a coffee morning for parents. Being new to the area, we came along. There was a lot of information on different things happening at the school, such as Family Learning groups running in the Family Room – a dedicated space used by different groups to support parents. A new group started in that room in our first year, the Fort Drop-In. Facilitated by staff from Victoria Park Child and Family Centre, it provided support and information for parents as well as being a social group with lots of activities from pottery to painting to jewellery-making to cooking and outings. That group has been invaluable to me over the years.

After my daughter's first year at nursery we had to move house as the owners wanted to sell where we were living. There was nothing available in Fort's catchment area so we had to move to Trinity. During this time my long-term mental health problems worsened and I struggled to cope at times. The nursery staff were so supportive, and the groups I was involved in at the school meant I had a focus and purpose which helped in my treatment

and recovery. When it came time to enroll my daughter in school, I chose to keep her at Fort partly because I couldn't imagine leaving a place where there was so much support for parents, and also because I was so impressed with the school, the staff and how well my friends' P1 children were doing. The transition from nursery to school was a huge focus, and the children were so well-prepared and excited. I wanted that for my daughter, and I didn't want to lose the support I had for myself, especially at that stage in my recovery.

During my elder daughter's second year at nursery she was allocated a full time place, and my younger daughter was referred to Victoria Park Child and Family Centre where she was taken on by a child minder. This was to allow me to continue my recovery and to attend classes at Inchkeith House. In addition to her time with the child minder, my younger daughter and I began to attend PEEP and pre-nursery classes at Fort which helped her get to know some of the nursery staff. This was really important as she was a lot less confident than her big sister, and suffered from separation anxiety. When she came to start nursery it went a lot more smoothly than it would have done without her experience in pre-nursery groups. She has just started primary 1 and neither she nor any of the other children have been upset or nervous about starting school because of the transition events run by the nursery and Family Learning – visits to the P1 classroom almost daily, time in the gym hall, playground and project rooms with the P1 teacher and class. And this year, the P1 teacher and classroom assistant happen to be the nursery teacher and nursery nurse from my elder daughter's first year in nursery. And my elder daughter's teacher in the afternoons was my younger daughter's nursery teacher. The continuity is excellent, and the children find it very exciting to have teachers at school they knew in nursery.

People have asked me if I'm concerned about Fort's reputation, but I don't feel the reputation is justified. My children have had nothing but an excellent education, and my friends are all happy too with the progress their children have made. Fort has the ability to teach each child at an individual level, and with all children spending time with the Support for Learning teachers (for whatever reason – children will be slower and quicker in different areas) there's no stigma attached to it. My elder daughter has had the opportunity to work with the class above for reading and maths because the smaller classes allow a flexible individual approach to teaching.

I don't want to think about how much further back I would be in my mental health recovery if my children had gone to Trinity and I had lost my support network of Family Learning, Drop-In, school and nursery staff. Fort has been invaluable to me and my family.

In one of the letters I received about the Fort closing is said that if needed they would re-open the school if numbers required it. What is the point in closing the school in the first place then?

Fort Primary is a good school and would hate to see it shut.

Also my daughter requires learning support for some subjects and feel she will not get the proper support if Fort is closed and needs to be moved as class sizes in other schools will double which is not fair on teachers and pupils.

Instead of wasting time and money on Trams that no one in Edinburgh wanted in the first place shouldn't the money have gone into schools and education.

I moved to Leith in the middle of the school year and visited Fort, Trinity and Victoria primaries to decide where to enroll my daughter. Fort is our catchment school, but I chose it because I liked the atmosphere in the school, the small class sizes and the playground. I was surprised that none of my neighbours went to Fort, and they warned me against going there. We've been here nearly two years now and I still feel I made the right choice. My daughter is very happy at school and doing brilliantly. I've already chosen not to send my children to Trinity, and I don't want to have that decision taken away from me. Fort is a great school.

I love going to Fort because there is a big playground with a forest to play in. I don't want to go to Trinity because I want to be on the pupil council or the eco council and if there are more children I'll never get a turn. Fort is the best school and I love my teachers and I love doing gym outside. I love the Friday club in the Community Wing and Fort Fun Sports and they haven't got those at Trinity. DON'T CLOSE OUR SCHOOL. WE LOVE OUR SCHOOL!

I like it when my mummy comes into school to do things because I can have cuddles. She came to do Kerbcraft with us. She makes the best cakes for the bake sales. She still goes into my nursery but I'm a school girl now. I like getting to make things when my mummy does things with Family Learning. Please keep our school open.

I don't want the school to shut down because we have a lot of space for a playground, and we have a big woods in the playground. If the school closes my friends and I will be split apart, and we'll have different types of work to do and new teachers, and we might get muddled up. I like the playground and the gym hall. The teachers are good because they give you time to think and they do fun activities like you can go outside for gym. If the school closes I would be really really sad because the only school I like is [Fort Primary](#).
