

# How to use this guide



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## Background to the PAR and PAR(S)

The PAR(S) replaces the Form F previously used for the assessment of adopters in Scotland. It was developed to address concerns about the format of the earlier form, to more closely reflect Scottish legislation and GIRFEC (Getting it Right for Every Child) priorities (<https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/>), and to support practitioners to bring best practice to their assessments. It is based on the English PAR that was developed in response to similar concerns. The Adoption Reform Programme in England, initiated by the Westminster Government in 2012, aimed to reduce delay for children waiting for an adoption placement, simplify the adoption system, and improve the quality of care and stability of placements for looked after children. The revised PAR and PAR(S) were designed to be more streamlined reporting tools; they require information to be summarised and place a much stronger emphasis on the information being analysed by the assessing social worker.

The English PAR was designed to cover changes in regulations which led to an increasing use of Fostering for Adoption (FfA) and concurrent placements, and to consider the additional skills and experience needed by prospective adopters in their role as foster carers when offering early permanence placements. Although FfA regulations are specific to England, there are close parallels to the position in Scotland, where the majority of children are initially placed with prospective parents under fostering regulations and where concurrent placements are becoming more common.

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## Introduction to the new Scottish edition PAR(S)

The PAR(S) was developed to provide a form that reflects the legal and practice context in Scotland, in particular reflecting the four legal routes for achieving permanence. The aim of the form is to provide a framework for assessment of prospective adopters, including their capacity to manage the role of foster carer in the context of dual approved or concurrent placements, that helps to secure permanent placements for children as early as possible.

The form uses the language of adoption throughout, however, it is structured to accommodate assessment of permanent foster carers, given the parallels to be found in both roles and tasks. The form is not designed to encompass the requirements of intercountry adoption, but can be adapted to be used in that way if the agency chooses to do so.

The PAR(S) is divided into two parts, the first of which provides a framework for the professional assessment of prospective adopters. This part of the form presents a comprehensive picture of prospective adopters, the experiences, skills and values that they are bringing to the adoption role and any support they may need to provide a loving, secure and stable home to a looked after child or children. The second part provides factual information about the applicants, as required by the Adoption Agencies (Scotland) Regulations 2009. A copy of Schedule 1 of the regulations can be found at the end of this guide (Appendix V) (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2009/154/schedule/1/made>).

The PAR(S) addresses the concerns raised by practitioners, panel members and decision-makers in Scotland about over-lengthy and repetitive reports. The template has been reorganised and streamlined to minimise duplication, with a strong emphasis on information being succinct and on there being analysis of each key section or sections. The analysis should answer the "so what" question – what does this information tell me about the applicant and what relevance does it have to the task being considered? The key themes to be incorporated throughout the report are clarity, brevity and analysis, and the way in which the report is laid out encourages the assessor to apply these principles.

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## The PAR(S) and this guide

This guide has been revised to assist workers in writing their assessments of prospective adopters using the PAR(S). Given the prevalence of placements where the child is initially placed under fostering regulations, the new form also considers the additional experience and skills needed by prospective adopters in relation to this aspect of their role.

Within the guide, there will be reference to four different routes to permanence:

- permanence order with authority to adopt
- adoption by direct petition
- dual approved placements
- concurrency

It is apparent that this terminology has different meanings across Scotland, and is in some cases used interchangeably, so, for clarity, a glossary of terms is provided at the end of this introduction.

This guide is primarily focused on Part 1, the descriptive part of the report, that brings together information about the applicant – what has made them into the person they are today and what created the stability and security in their adult life that will enable them to become an adopter. The information covers the applicant as an individual, their family and wider environmental factors, and the implications of these when offering a permanent placement. It also covers the new sections that look at the implications of unknown information or health uncertainties where very young babies are being placed in early

permanence placements, and the prospective adopter's understanding of the role of a concurrent or dual approved carer.

Part 2 of the report brings together the factual information about the applicant and feedback from the different reports, references and other supporting materials that are gathered during the assessment. There is a section at the end of Part 2 where all third party information is reported on, including the outcome of statutory checks, the medical adviser's comments and referee reports: these should be treated as confidential and not shared without the express permission of those providing the information.

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## What this guide is

It is hoped that by making use of this guide, assessing social workers will be able to collect the information that will form the basis of a sound assessment. It will also help to identify those areas where there is a need for support or further training.

Having collected the information, the guide assists in highlighting the areas for analysis, a key requirement of the PAR(S).

The PAR(S) is designed to encourage workers to provide key information in a way that gives a clear picture of the applicant/s and what they are offering as adopter/s, but is also succinct and provides an overall picture of significant information rather than exhaustive details of applicants' histories and lives.

Appendix I includes a checklist that can help in the planning of sessions with applicants and gathering of all the information required. It can be used by the assessor alone or in conjunction with their supervisor, to plan out the course of the assessment process and confirm that all information has been gathered and is available on the applicant's case file.

Some thought should be given to the order in which subject areas are covered with the applicant/s, as it may be more appropriate to cover more personal and sometimes painful areas of their lives once a relationship between assessor and applicant has been established.

Where adoption agencies are using Attachment Style Interviews or Adult Attachment Interviews, the information from these interviews will inform the assessment and may highlight other areas needing further exploration during the assessment.

This guide breaks down each area into four parts:

- extracts from the relevant section from the Guidance Notes that accompany the PAR(S);
- a list of questions that can be asked of applicants or that can be used to facilitate further discussion in order to collect some of the basic information required for the purposes of the assessment;
- some suggestions for how the information that has been collected can be analysed to see if it will be positive for adoption or could be seen as a potential area of concern or vulnerability by the assessing social worker;
- examples of how the information given could be evidenced from sources both within and outside of the family to provide verification of their account.

The guide follows the format of the PAR(S), and covers:

1. family and environmental factors;
2. becoming adopter/s – the assessment of adoptive parenting capacity.

The questions under these headings will help to give structure to the assessment task and some focus as to the order in which various topics may be covered by the assessor.

The additional information and checklists, provided in Chapter 4 and the Appendices, is intended to complement each agency's own procedures and formats. These include the following.

- A plan for an interview with a personal referee for an applicant.
- Suggestions of where to find information for a health and safety check of the applicant's home.
- Suggestions of where to find information for a pet assessment.
- Areas to be covered by a safer caring policy.
- An assessment checklist to be used when completing and signing off the assessment.
- An example of an ecomap showing where applicants get their support from.
- Suggestions for additional areas to cover when considering applications for specific children/intercountry adoption and second-time (or subsequent) adopters.
- Information to be covered in second opinion visits.
- Worksheets for adopters that are linked to sections of the PAR(S), and a new workbook addressing the issues in early permanence.

In this guide, the term "applicant" is more commonly used to obviate the necessity of continuously using the terms "applicant/applicants". The term "child" is used rather than the term "child/ren".

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## What this guide is not

This guide is not intended to be a quick and easy way of undertaking an assessment. Although most of the guide is presented in question format, these are designed to help the assessor cover key areas in what should be a dynamic process rather than one which consists simply of answers to questions or the completion of a checklist. It is hoped they will also stimulate ideas for the assessing social worker for questions that are pertinent to each individual assessment.

Assessors must be alert to the understanding and learning styles and complexities of each applicant whom they assess, be prepared to pursue different lines of questioning and exploration accordingly, and analyse information on the basis of its relevance to the role of an adoptive parent.

While the guide provides a standard format for completing an assessment report, it is important for assessors to maintain their individual styles of seeking, analysing and presenting information.

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## Implications of the Independent Care Review

In February 2017, an independent review of care for looked after children in Scotland was launched, the results of which were published in February 2020. As part of a four-stage recommendation and plan, Part 1, *The Promise*, states:

*Scotland must support adoptive parents to provide a loving and permanent home for children whilst recognising the importance of children understanding their birth identity and the relationships that are important to the child.*

*The Promise* also highlighted the issue of sibling placements, noting that approximately 70 per cent of children who are adopted in Scotland lose contact with at least one sibling. In recognition of both these factors, the PAR(S) emphasises the importance of the prospective adopter's ability to work with birth parents and family of origin in all cases, and particularly where early permanence is being considered. The question of whether applicants have the capacity to manage sibling placements also needs to be explored to ensure that opportunities for siblings to be placed together are not missed. It also makes explicit the importance of maintaining significant relationships once a child has been placed, so preserving the child's sense of identity. For the prospective adopter, this means demonstrating the skills and confidence to support the notion of a child's dual identity which, for the assessor, is an area that requires sensitive exploration throughout the course of the assessment.

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## Glossary of terms

- **Permanence order with authority to adopt** – children who are subject to a permanence order with authority to adopt who are placed with approved adopters.
- **Adoption by direct petition** – the direct petition by approved adopters in relation to children who have been placed with them on a fostering basis and for whom the agency has a clear plan for adoption.
- **Dual approval** – the dual approval of prospective adopters as foster carers where either the agency has not made a formal decision about the legal route but adoption appears to be the likely plan for the child, or where a formal plan for adoption has been agreed by the panel but the child remains subject to a supervision order and is placed with the prospective adopters under the fostering regulations.
- **Concurrency** – Concurrent planning, whereby adopters are also approved as foster carers and have an active role in returning the child to the care of the birth family, but are available to adopt the child if this does not prove achievable.
- **Fostering for Adoption (FfA)** – this is a term only used in England, and applies to children whose carers are approved under both fostering and adoption regulations in order to support the potential for early permanence before final plans have been confirmed.

## Summary

The PAR(S) replaces the Form F for the assessment of prospective adopters. It is designed to be a more streamlined reporting tool with a stronger focus on a succinct presentation of information and clear analysis. More broadly, it is part of the drive to create systems that tackle the longstanding and persisting problem of drift and delay for children waiting for an adoption placement. (See the ongoing Permanently Progressing research study, <https://bit.ly/2M3j1DZ>)

Of itself, a form will not ensure best practice, but the PAR(S) provides practitioners with a tool to help undertake assessments of prospective adopters in the context of the critical need to achieve early permanence for children. The PAR(S) encourages the consideration of the full range of options for children, requires consideration of the alternative routes to permanence and, more specifically, the applicant's capacity to offer such placements. Where providing early permanence for infants is being considered through dual approval or concurrent placement, in each section the PAR(S) requires the assessor to provide evidence of the prospective adopter's capacity to offer early permanence as well as the supports needed to optimise the chances of this being successful.

There are clear risks associated with each route to permanence, and it is the job of the assessor to ensure that the applicant understands these and is equipped to deal with them. This task lies at the heart of a good assessment and is where the skills, knowledge and experience of the assessor are essential. By making consideration of different legal routes intrinsic to the assessment, the structure of the PAR(S) encourages an exploration of what may be untapped potential to meet the needs of all the individual children needing permanence. Some adopters will not want to be approved for the placement of young children and infants where there is continuing uncertainty about the final plan, for example, where concurrence is being considered, but it is nevertheless helpful to explore these options as part of the assessment process.

Encouraging examples of practice that have supported early permanence have emerged in Scotland in recent years. In some cases, these involve prospective adopters working closely with birth parents to support an assessment of the potential for reunification. It is hoped that as use of the PAR(S) becomes more widespread, we may see further developments of this approach. Whilst such practice inevitably involves some risk for the adults involved, the evidence that the children benefit from the minimisation of moves and the early development of a secure base is so strong, that the opportunity to pursue this option needs to be explored whenever possible.