



THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND

**Diocese of St Edmundsbury  
and Ipswich**

## Elders

Lay Elders began in our Diocese in the late 1960s as a pioneering experiment in lay ministry in our North Suffolk Deanery. Their ministry was developed and expanded so that by now there are over 500 Elders, spread across the whole Diocese.

### What are Lay Elders?

Elders are men and women chosen by the local Church and authorised by the Diocesan Bishop for ministry in the local Church and community. They work mainly in the area of pastoral care and/or leading worship.

Their Commissioning takes place at any appropriate date in their parish Church. They serve initially for a maximum of three years, and may be re-commissioned for further periods of up to three years.

### Who may be an Elder?

Anyone who is baptised and confirmed, a regular communicant, in good standing in the local Church and community, and able to fulfil the tasks of an Elder, may be considered for this ministry. There is no lower or upper age limit.

Lay Elders are unique to Suffolk, so they are not named in Canon Law. However, their ministry falls within what Canon Law permits lay people to do. In effect the ministry of Lay Elder gathers into a coherent ministry, valid its own right, what Canon Law permits lay people to do occasionally. Our Diocesan Handbook has Bishop's Regulations for Elder ministry.

## What do Lay Elders do?

An Elder's ministry is shaped by his/her gifts; availability and local needs. If a benefice has several Elders, each one's ministry may have a different focus.

An Elder may do pastoral work, e.g. visiting people at home or in hospital, following up baptisms or funerals, visiting newcomers, working with young families or elderly people, visiting the local school.

Liturgically, an Elder may lead Morning and Evening Prayer and other forms of Service of the Word, read the Bible in worship, distribute bread or wine at Communion, and take Communion to people at home or in hospital. Although Elders are not licensed to preach, the several alternatives to the sermon permitted in Common Worship are open to Elders.

## Working in a team

Every Lay Elder works in a ministry team, even if it is a team of only two, Elder and Incumbent. Often it is a mixed team of lay and ordained ministers, working across several parishes in a benefice. So an Elder needs to be a good team player, able to work with others and to value their skills and experience. If Lay Elder's ministry is being developed from scratch in a benefice, it is helpful if a *group* of them can be created, each with a different focus for their ministry.

## Discernment

The first step which an Incumbent and PCC should take is to review ministry needs locally, and then to consider if Elder ministry might help to meet them.

There should be thorough and well-informed discussion in ministry team and PCC. The Incumbent and potential Elder need to talk together about what ministry could be offered, being realistic in the light of the Elder's circumstances. They need to consider how that ministry would be supported, and when and how Basic Training will be given (see overleaf). All candidates will need a DBS check and to complete a C3 Safeguarding training course.

## Approval by PCC

After these discussions, an Incumbent may put before the PCC a proposal to request a specific person's appointment to Elder ministry. At least 75% of the PCC needs to vote in favour before you can proceed. If the Elder will work in more than one parish in the benefice, the PCCs of **all** the parishes in which the Elder will minister should discuss and vote.

A 'Request for Commissioning' form is then completed by Incumbent, Elder and PCC Secretary and returned to the Elders' Secretary. The Incumbent arranges a Commissioning with the Diocesan or Suffragan Bishop, or Archdeacon.

Usually, the 'Order of Service' for Commissioning is included in the main Sunday worship in the parish church.

At Commissioning, Elders receive a Certificate signed by the Diocesan Bishop, signifying that they have the Bishop's authorisation to fulfil an Elder's ministry.

Prior to Commissioning, every Elder is required to complete a Declaration about their fitness to work with children and vulnerable adults and to attend a Safeguarding course, in line with Diocesan Policy on Safeguarding.

## Training

Elders' training is designed to be flexible enough to support people's diverse ministries, to build on their existing skills and experience, and increase their confidence. The pattern of Elders' training across the Diocese is:

(1) **Basic Training**

A four-session course for groups which may be of interest to all, but which is necessary for all who are involved in, or considering, any kind of ministry, whether local (e.g. Lay Elder ministry) or national (e.g. Reader ministry or ordination).

(2) **Further Training**

One or both of the Enhancing Worship and Pastoral Care modules (according to the nature of the Elder's ministry to be completed within 18 months of commissioning).

Training may be run by the Incumbent or other local ministers, or by another Diocesan Leader. The sessions are user-friendly and emphasise learning from experience of ministry. Training involves no formally assessed work though Elders may be asked to do some preparation between sessions.

More details and samples of training resources are available from the Lay Education Advisor and are on the Diocesan website [www.cofesuffolk.org](http://www.cofesuffolk.org).

## For more information

General enquiries about new Elders or their initial or ongoing training:

Mission and Ministry Team Senior Administrator

Mrs Lesley Steed

[lesley.steed@cofesuffolk.org](mailto:lesley.steed@cofesuffolk.org)

Phone 01473 298510

  
**Growing in God**

Produced by Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich  
Updated June 2018.