Education Bill Briefing
Emergency Life Support skills

What is Emergency Life Support?
Emergency Life Support (ELS) is the key set of actions needed to keep someone alive until professional help arrives. It includes performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), dealing with choking, serious bleeding, how to put someone in the recovery position and helping someone who may be having a heart attack.

What needs to happen?
We are calling for ELS, including vital CPR, to be a mandatory part of the National Curriculum in England. Secondary school students should be taught it from year 7, and their skills should be refreshed every year until they leave school.

ELS is simple, and easy to teach and learn. It can be performed without any special medical knowledge. It takes as little as two hours to teach, just 0.2% of a school year. In just two hours of their school life, children can learn the skills to save a life. Teachers can include ELS in a range of different subjects including PSHE, PE, Science and Citizenship.

Children of 10 years and above can learn the full range of ELS including vital CPR, and younger children are also able to learn many of the skills. Primary schools should be encouraged to teach their children many of the skills including dialling 999, calling for help and checking for danger.

Leaving decisions on ELS to individual schools has meant that too few children are trained in these crucial skills. This requires the Government to act now to drastically increase the numbers trained in ELS.

Why is ELS so essential?
30,000 people each year in the UK have cardiac arrests outside of the hospital environment, of which less than 10 per cent will survive to be discharged from hospital.

Around two-thirds of cardiac arrests that occur outside of hospital occur in the home, and nearly half that occur in public are witnessed by bystanders. With each minute that passes in cardiac arrest before defibrillation, chances of survival are reduced by about 10 per cent. Immediate CPR in a shockable out-of-hospital cardiac arrest can improve the chances of survival by up to a factor of three.

Evidence from the US shows that if an emergency ambulance is called and immediate bystander CPR is used, followed by early defibrillation and effective post-resuscitation care, survival rates following cardiac arrest can exceed 50 percent.

ELS isn’t just about stats and numbers. It makes a huge difference to people’s lives.
Tabatha McElligott was just 17 years old when she collapsed at school. While studying for her A-levels, she had suffered a cardiac arrest.

Luckily, the school receptionist was trained in CPR – this bought Tabatha a few crucial minutes before a community responder arrived with a defibrillator.

Tabatha said: “If I had been at home with friends when it happened, there is very little chance I would still be here today. There are others who are not so lucky.

“If everyone had the simple knowledge of ELS skills at a young age through their schooling it may not seem so daunting if they are ever caught in an emergency situation.”
How could this work in practice?

Organisations including the BHF, St John Ambulance and British Red Cross already successfully provide training and support for teachers so they can deliver ELS. Community Resuscitation Development Officers (CRDOs), established by the BHF, develop community resuscitation programmes across their regions within Ambulance Trusts, and deliver ELS training and support to teachers as part of the wider ambulance service response.

With additional resources, these models could be successfully applied across all schools in England. There are over 3,300 local authority maintained secondary schools in England, teaching over 3.2 million children. We estimate that for ELS to be taught to every pupil when they start secondary school and then refreshed yearly, the Government would need to provide around five additional CRDOs in each of the 12 Ambulance Trusts in England.

Do teachers support this idea?

We commissioned research in February 2011 to find out the views of teachers on the idea of schools being mandated to train pupils in ELS. There was particularly high support among teachers with 86 per cent of the 500 surveyed said they were in favour of this move.

Teachers have a lot to fit into the day, and the Government wants a new slimmed-down National Curriculum. It is clear that teachers themselves view ELS as a key skill that should be included within this.

This support is also replicated among parents and children across the UK. 70 per cent of 2,072 parents surveyed wanted to see their children trained in ELS. 78 per cent of 1,000 children surveyed aged 11 to 15 years wanted to learn these key skills, with a large proportion unsure of what they would do in an emergency.

Our vision is for every child to leave school knowing how to save a life

We are already behind many of our European neighbours – France, Denmark and Norway all have lifesaving skills such as CPR as a mandatory part of their school curricula. They have been using strategies ranging from self-learning with DVDs and manikins to structured teaching – all as part of the curriculum.

Further afield, in Seattle CPR has been taught for over thirty years within PE lessons at all schools funded by the city government. Over half of the population of Seattle and surrounding King County are now trained in CPR, and survival rates for witnessed cardiac arrests were very high at 46 per cent in 2009.

By teaching children ELS at school, we can create a new generation of lifesavers. Children can learn and retain new skills more easily than adults and are also often present at emergencies.

We all learnt skills as children – how to ride a bike, play a musical instrument, or speak a foreign language. Why not add ‘How to save a life’ to that set of skills?

About the British Heart Foundation and Resuscitation Council (UK)

The British Heart Foundation operates a successful Heartstart Schools Programme, teaching children ELS. Currently, around 400 secondary schools in England are teaching ELS through Heartstart. The BHF spends around £800k per annum on resources for teaching ELS, including manikins, schools pack contents, and teacher supply cover.

The Resuscitation Council (UK) is principally involved in producing and disseminating national guidelines in cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

If you believe every child should leave school knowing how to save a life please contact Gemma Reay, BHF Public Affairs Officer on 020 7554 0154 or email reayg@bhf.org.uk