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MIDDLE SCHOOLS:- NO FINANCIAL PRESSURE ON DECISION, CONFIRMS MP. DEBATE MUST BE FAIR, AND NOT PREJUDGED IN FAVOUR OF TWO TIER.

North East Bedfordshire MP Alistair Burt met with schools minister Jim Knight MP yesterday, to question him about the financial commitment of the Government to Bedford's schools, through the Building Schools for the Future Programme. It has been suggested locally that the money from the programme would be tied into a decision to opt for two tier rather than three tier education, and used in the argument to persuade councillors to change the system.

Alistair Burt said:- 'The Minister confirms that the BSF money is not tied to any particular outcome of the consultation. Indeed he made clear that the Government has no preference between two tier and three tier systems, and would look at the proposals of the council for the future of education in the authority on their merits.

I also understand that although there have been preliminary discussions between the Government and the Council, these are not sufficiently far advanced for figures to have been agreed. So whilst there is a need for the consultation to proceed as quickly as possible to fit within the funding wave already agreed, it seems to me that this can go ahead without schools, teachers, parents and governors feeling the pressure that unless two tier is opted for, the money will not be there.

All will depend on the arguments for how the quality of education can be enhanced under whatever structure. This provides the opportunity for Middle Schools to argue their worth, which I am sure they will take. I believe that there is also no reason why there could not also be consideration of the retention of the three tier system in part of the Bedford Unitary Council area, possibly the rural area of my constituency. This works elsewhere, provides more flexibility, and might fit compatibly with Central Bedfordshire in those areas with common catchments.

This debate must be fair to all points of view, not driven in just one direction but at least we now know that it cannot be decided by finance alone.'

<ENDS>

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