Why not provide some more hospital beds for all purposes?

The Department of Health and Social Care has provided the following answer to your written parliamentary question (90313):

Question:
To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, what plans he has to increase the number of beds in NHS England hospitals. (90313)

Tabled on: 09 December 2021

Answer:
Edward Argar:

National Health Service bed capacity is not fixed and can be flexible to meet changes in demand.

The seasonal flu and COVID-19 booster vaccination programmes also aim to reduce the level of hospital admissions and increase bed capacity. We have also provided an additional £478 million to the NHS for the rest of this year to continue the enhanced hospital discharge programme, to maximise the number of available beds.

The answer was submitted on 15 Dec 2021 at 16:16.

Let me begin by repeating my gratitude to all those NHS staff who worked beyond the call of duty and took risks themselves to look after all too many covid patients. My criticisms of senior management below do not take anything away from their covid work done.

The issue I have been raising for a long time is why does the NHS run down the number of beds or fail to increase them? This government has made available very large extra amounts of money both to improve the mainstream NHS and to respond to the special challenge of covid 19. As we found during past periods of accelerated funding increases as well there has been a marked reluctance to ever use this to expand bed capacity. Staff numbers have expanded, but maybe not enough of the specialists needed for crucial clinical and nursing teams to staff additional beds. There has been plenty of expansion of the overhead, with more regulatory and policy quangos.

When the NHS was persuaded to spend substantial sums on setting up and equipping the Nightingales they obtained around 5000 extra beds with space to expand that further. I urged them to make these the covid hospitals, isolating patients who would otherwise go to the District Generals who could get on with their regular work. Of course the NHS had to re purpose medical staff so more worked on covid all the time it was raging and had to recruit as many extra as possible for temporary or more permanent work. Instead the NHS insisted on putting covid patients mainly into the District General hospitals. This created cross infection problems and reduced the capacity of

the NHS to carry on with non covid work. The NHS then shut the Nightingales as soon as possible for a total cost of around £500 m. As you can see from a recent Parliamentary answer I received we are not allowed to know where all those beds and equipment have gone to. Surely they should be put to good use?

The non answer to the two questions above shows a strong reluctance to even countenance expanding the number of beds. Why? When money is available it is a good time to do so.