

1. Question from Councillor Sue Roberts to Councillor David Rouane, Leader of the council

We encourage developers to deliver homes that are zero carbon both in operation and construction (Para 8.35 of our Local Plan). We should lead and set an example with the new Council office to be built in Didcot. The advice from the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee (now CEEAC), accepted by Cabinet, and concerning the original design for the office at Crowmarsh, was that it should be as low carbon *as possible* in operation and construction.

Advice has not been sought from CEEAC on the very different design for the Didcot office. It will release 1670 Tonnes of CO₂ equivalent in the construction phase. By comparison, this would be around 300 years' worth of emissions from you or me. The final build will achieve only BREEAM excellent and not BREEAM outstanding.

I understand it would cost 10% extra to achieve BREEAM outstanding. This should be seen in the context of the *many-fold* increase in cost from the original specification to the current design.

My question, therefore, is given that we know it to be possible, why are we not building to the standard that we want others to build to? Could we please, at this stage, request a design and costing for a truly zero-carbon BREAM-outstanding construction?

I need hardly remind you that the magnitude of worldwide carbon emissions *in the next 9 years* are critical to keeping global heating to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels. Heating above that would be catastrophic. Our near-term (construction) emissions are even more important than our long-term (operational) emissions. The UK must take a lead in reducing carbon emissions, especially over the next year whilst we hold the Presidency of the Conference of Parties (COP) 26.

Answer

Paragraph 8.35 of South Oxfordshire District Council's local plan states: New build non-residential buildings are required to meet the BREEAM excellent standard. This broadly represents performance equivalent to the top 10% of UK non-domestic buildings. Other recognised equivalent assessment methodology may be used, applicants are advised to check with the Council in order to ensure their alternative assessment methodology is acceptable. In addition to meeting the BREEAM excellent standard, new build non-residential development proposals of 1,000sqm or more, are required to achieve at least a 40% reduction in carbon emissions, increasing to 50% from 2026.

As set out in the concept design papers which went through Scrutiny, Cabinet and Full Council in September and October 2021, the approved concept design for office accommodation at the council's Didcot Gateway site is

consistent with the requirements of the current local plan, and indeed it aims to exceed the 40% reduction in energy use target set in the plan. A robust approach was taken through the concept design phase to minimise the embodied carbon within the fabric of the building, following a detailed lifecycle analysis of potential construction materials based on our design and operational requirements, to the lowest possible level given site and project constraints. Additional sustainability options have also been incorporated to achieve carbon neutrality for regulated energy while in operation. Due to the size of the site, it is not possible to also generate enough power for unregulated energy, but as set out in the papers the proposal is to purchase this element from solely renewable resources via the grid.

To be truly sustainable, developments must strike a balance between the three pillars of sustainability – social, economic and environmental. We continue to keep our office accommodation requirements, the financial viability of the programme and our sustainability outcomes under review. The council also continues to consider the impacts of all of our council operations and progress measures to meet our climate change commitments.

2. Question from Councillor Sue Roberts to Councillor David Rouane, Leader of the council

This question is asked in the light of the critical need swiftly to reduce worldwide carbon emissions in the short-term. This urgency has become more apparent since the Conference of Parties (COP) 26.

We have a major task ahead of us to get our Council estate to net zero carbon by 2025 in accordance with the target set by this Council. Retrofitting our leisure centres and other buildings will consume labour, materials and money.

My question is about whether it might be better to use the existing Abbey House in Vale for our shared Council administration rather than building a new office in Didcot, following the precept of a circular economy; re-using rather than disposal.

I understand that the space there is more than sufficient. Abbey House itself would require full retrofitting for energy efficiency and updating for modern use. Transport links are poor. However, the draft Oxfordshire Plan 2050 vision is for a connected county, with good public transport. The Councils could use their influence and resources to kickstart superb connectivity for Abingdon. The land saved at Didcot could be used for all sorts of other purposes, such as social housing and a welcoming park. Most importantly, precious resource could be diverted from a brand-new build to attending to the retrofitting of our own estate.

Please could you tell me whether a *recent* assessment has been made, in the light of the climate and ecology priorities in our new Corporate Plan, of the suitability of Abbey House as a shared office space for the two councils? By recent, I mean since our Corporate Plan was published. If so, please could we see the resulting report? If

not, could a new assessment be made, with a joint committee of Vale and South councillors set up for this purpose?

Answer

On 24 September 2020, Cabinet considered a confidential report regarding office accommodation site allocation. This was shared with all councillors. This latest report included a high level review of sites across South and Vale, carried out by Cushman and Wakefield, the council's strategic property advisors. The review included existing sites owned by each council in each district and also reviewed third party sites that the councils could seek to rent or purchase. This review included Abbey House. Each site was assessed against a range of core criteria fundamental to delivery, namely specification, timescale and geography. Alongside these requirements more detailed analysis was carried out on the following criteria: programme to deliver, planning policy, impact on existing strategy for site, wider benefit of office use in this location, viability and potential alternative use values. The confidential decision taken by Cabinet at that meeting determined Didcot Gateway as the preferred site allocation for new office accommodation.

Since this review took place, the council has published its Corporate Plan, placing greater emphasis on strategic priorities such as: the need to take action on the climate emergency, a sustainable plan to develop Didcot Gateway, the delivery of sustainable new offices and to diversify our revenue streams. All of these would add weight to the choice of Didcot Gateway as the preferred site and diminish the case for Abbey House.

However, in line with best practice in any project, officers have continued to keep the Council's requirements under further review. Recognising that Abbey House is owned by the Vale and not South, I will continue to discuss with the Leader of the Vale the opportunity to jointly undertake an assessment of Abbey House as part of this work, though also recognising that Vale may have alternative plans for this property.