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To: Scrutiny Committee – 13 May 2026

Subject: Call-in Decision: 26/0007 Heritage Conservation Strategy Amendment

Status: Unrestricted

Summary

This report responds to the call-in of decision 26/0007 Heritage Conservation Strategy Amendment. It explains the proposed amendments to KCC's Heritage Conservation Strategy to reflect the (already agreed) policy to divest KCC's eight windmills while securing a sustainable future as community assets. It summarises the Growth, Environment & Transport Cabinet Committee's recommendation to establish a single Kent Windmills Trust and the Cabinet Member's reasons for declining that recommendation. It confirms the amended Strategy supports viable community-led trust proposals, rather than committing KCC to establish and run a countywide trust.

1. Background to the Heritage Conservation Strategy amendment Executive Decision 26/00007, 1st April 2026

- 1.1 On 2nd August 2024, the decision by Kent County Council to divest its eight windmills was taken by the Cabinet Member for Environment. This decision was that:
- (i) KCC should seek to divest itself of the windmills it currently owns by a method that ensures that the windmills have a sustainable future in which they are appropriately cared for and maintained as community assets, and that
 - (ii) The Heritage Conservation Strategy is updated to this effect.
- 1.2 In advance of this decision, a review of options for the future of windmills was undertaken and discussed at the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee on 15th November 2023. The review was then published as part of the windmill asset public consultation, which ran November 2023 to January 2024.
- 1.3 The outcome of the public consultation and the final proposed policy change for windmills was considered by members of the Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee at the meeting on 9th July 2024. The key decision confirming Kent County Council should seek to divest itself of the windmills was made the following month – [decision 24/00068](#).

- 1.4 A requirement of the key decision was the update of the Heritage Conservation Strategy. Adopted and published in March 2022, the Strategy did not include provision for the mill's divestment and therefore required updating to reflect this new policy position.
- 1.5 On 10th March 2026, the amendments to the Heritage Conservation Strategy were presented to the Growth, Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee. These amendments were:
- a) A new objective, stating: *Kent County Council should seek to divest itself of the windmills it currently owns by a method that ensures that the windmills have a sustainable future in which they are appropriately cared for and maintained as community assets.*
 - b) Amendment of the objective concerning the management approach, to acknowledge that mills would still need to be managed during the divestment and that any remaining in Kent County Council's ownership following the divestment process, would still need a management approach.
 - c) In acknowledgement that divestment would remove the need to find alternative funding approaches, removal of the objective to *explore alternative funding mechanisms for windmills, including setting up a charitable Trust to oversee management, and develop a funding strategy.*
 - d) In recognition of the support that the mill's volunteer groups and trusts (and other interested parties) would need, the objective concerning Kent County Council's relationships with these bodies was amended to include: *the groups and other interested parties will be supported through the divestment process.*

2. Background to the decline of cabinet committee's recommendation

- 2.1 During the Growth, Environment & Transport Cabinet Committee on 10th March, the members voted in favour of the recommendation to include in the Heritage Conservation Strategy: *"The council commits to setting up a Kent Windmills Trust to coordinate the future management of Kent's windmills and to support current and future volunteer groups intending to own or manage Kent windmills"*.
- 2.2 This recommendation was declined by the Cabinet Member as:
- a) The approach being taken is to empower local communities to propose to KCC how they would like to take responsibility for their local windmill. This means that different approaches may be taken for different windmills to meet local needs. Creating a trust for all the windmills would take away this flexibility and impose a one size fits all delivery model.
 - b) The changes to the strategy do not preclude any viable proposal for community led trusts for any or all of the windmills coming forward. This would be a decision for the community or interested party to put forward during the divestment process.

- c) The establishment of a trust by Kent County Council would not be aligned with the key decision to divest itself of the windmills it owns. The establishment of a trust was one of the options assessed in the 2023 review and considered as part of the subsequent consultation, the associated report to Environment and Transport Cabinet Committee in 2024 and the resulting key decision. A trust would create new financial and governance risks for the Council. Certainly, in the short term, and possibly into the longer term, a reduction in Kent County Council's financial expenditure and burdens would not be achieved. And therefore, the 2024 decision's forecast revenue and capital savings from the divestment would not be realised.
- d) It is the administration's position that council tax payers' money must be used as a last resort for non-statutory items. The county council recognises that the windmills are important assets to the county's heritage and especially important to the local communities; hence, the divestment key decision makes provisions to ensure that the process is progressed in a way that ensures a sustainable future for the windmills. The authority must first seek to fully divest itself of the financial liability and risk associated with the windmills. A review and consideration of alternative options for any mills that remain in our ownership would only take place once the divestment process is concluded.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 In conclusion, the amendment to the Heritage Conservation Strategy updates the document to reflect the Council's previously agreed policy to divest its eight windmills; while setting out how the Council will support communities through the divestment process. It does not commit the Council to establishing and operating a single countywide trust, which would reduce local flexibility and introduce additional governance and financial risk.
- 3.2 The changes to the strategy do not preclude the establishment of a (or a number of) viable community-led trust(s) being established. Any proposal for such a trust to secure the sustainable future for the windmills as valued local assets would be welcomed as a potential bid during the divestment process. The objectives will be amended to make this clear.
- 3.3 For purposes of clarification, the changes to the Heritage Conservation Strategy windmill objectives are set out in the table below.

Heritage Conservation Strategy 2022	Heritage Conservation Strategy 2026
n/a – new objective	Kent County Council should seek to divest itself of the windmills it currently owns by a method that ensures that the windmills have a sustainable future in which they are appropriately cared for and maintained as community assets.
Follow a management approach to KCC-owned windmills, so that:	For any windmills remaining in KCC ownership and management, to follow a

Heritage Conservation Strategy 2022	Heritage Conservation Strategy 2026
<p>i) Mills capable of milling flour (Drapers Mill, Margate, and Cranbrook Mill) remain able to do so.</p> <p>ii) The weatherproofing programme will be undertaken as needed on a rolling cycle.</p> <p>iii) Static mills will be returned to visual completeness subject to funding</p> <p>iv) Static mills will be made active wherever possible [also Strategic Aim 3].</p>	<p>management approach so that:</p> <p>i) Mills capable of milling flour (Drapers Mill, Margate, and Cranbrook Mill) remain able to do so.</p> <p>ii) The weatherproofing programme will be undertaken as needed on a rolling cycle.</p> <p>iii) Static mills will be returned to visual completeness subject to funding.</p> <p>iv) Static mills will be made active wherever possible.</p>
<p>KCC's relationship with the windmill volunteer groups will be strengthened.</p>	<p>KCC's relationship with the windmill volunteer groups will be strengthened and the groups and other interested parties will be supported through the divestment process as appropriate; support will be provided for any viable proposal for establishing community-led trusts to oversee the future management and/or ownership of any or all of the county's mills.</p>
<p>Explore alternative funding mechanisms for the windmills, including setting up a charitable Trust to oversee management, and develop a funding strategy.</p>	<p>n/a – objective removed</p>

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