

THURSFORD - PF/25/2102 - Change of use from agricultural land to a dog walking field with associated secure car parking, shed for use by dog walkers, associated vehicular access improvements to serve dog walking field and a car park for Thursford Cemetery as users currently have to park on the highway at Land To The North Of Thursford Cemetery, Gunthorpe Road, Thursford, NR21 0BP

Minor Development

Target Date: 19th February 2026
Extension of Time: 27th February 2026
Case Officer: Olivia Luckhurst
Full Planning Permission

RELEVANT PLANNING CONSTRAINTS

Countryside
Landscape Character Assessment - Tributary Farmland

RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

None.

THE APPLICATION

Seeks the change of use from agricultural land to a dog walking field with associated secure car parking, shed for use by dog walkers, associated vehicular access improvements to serve dog walking field and a car park for Thursford Cemetery.

REASONS FOR REFERRAL TO COMMITTEE

The application has been referred to committee at the request of Councillor Sarah Butikofer due to considering that there are grounds under SS1 and HC7 of the new Local Plan to ask for this application to be discussed at committee. The benefits to the local community from this scheme are recognised by the Parish Council who are extremely supportive. The application is made by a local farmer trying to diversify their land usage.

PARISH/TOWN COUNCIL

Thursford Parish Council – Support.

CONSULTATIONS

Norfolk County Council Highways - Object - Appreciate that Gunthorpe Road is very lightly trafficked presently and the cemetery would benefit from the use of a car parking facility for visitors what would otherwise park on the verge. However, conscious that the dog walking element of the application will generate new traffic with vehicles visiting on an hourly basis and therefore do not consider the network suitable for that purpose.

The carriageway width of Gunthorpe Road measures just 2.8m and is only capable of allowing one vehicle to pass. It has no formal passing places along its length. It is unlit and away from centres of population and therefore a car dependant site. Grass was observed to be growing in the centre of the road in some parts and it's of a fragile construction.

At the junction of Gunthorpe Road with North Lane, towards its southern end, visibility to the trafficked direction was observed to be only 2.4m x 42m. For the speed of traffic experienced along North Lane, minimum visibility splays of 2.4m x 120m should be provided to accord with the adopted national guidance as set out in the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB).

At the highway junction of Gunthorpe Road with Hindringham Road, towards the north, visibility to the trafficked direction was also obstructed by hedging to approximately 17m and to the non-trafficked at just 10m. It is observed from our records that there is a recorded accident at this junction.

Ultimately, it is the view of the Highway Authority that an approval of this application in its present form would lead to an intensification of use on Gunthorpe Road resulting in conditions detrimental to highway safety.

Landscape (NNDC) - No objection - Clarification requested of the type of fencing to be used around the site boundaries. The Block Plan states '1.8m high wooden fencing with wooden posts 1m off boundary'.

Confirmation is required as to whether this is deer fencing with wire mesh infill which would be appropriate, or close board fencing which would not be suitable. The site is part of a larger arable field. New native hedge planting with trees is proposed on the west and north site boundaries. This is appropriate, given that these are new artificial boundaries in the middle of a cropped field. Trees such as oak, field maple, hawthorn would be appropriate. The Planning Statement states that the hedge will be hawthorn. A mixed species hedge would be preferable to provide a richer habitat. This should be amended on the Block Plan.

The Planning Statement also sets out that there will be a tree shelter belt north of the site to protect a group of holiday homes. This is shown notionally on the Block Plan, but there are no details.

The parking area is acceptable in terms of location and surface materials, as is the proposed timber field shelter. Subject to clarification of the fencing and satisfactory amendment of the Block Plan, there are no further substantive issues relating to landscape and visual impact.

Planting details can either be included prior to consent (i.e. species, size, % mix, planting densities, protection measures) or can be secured by way of condition.

Economic Development (NNDC) - No objection.

Environmental Health (NNDC) - Note that this site has been relocated from that in previous applications - to be at distance from residential boundaries. Recommend that use is in accordance with the submitted details. Groups should not be permitted. The field is only to be available to private individuals, and their dogs sessions are of fifty-minute session with a ten-minute change over period.

In addition, suggest that the sessions are time limited and would suggest 07.00 hrs to 19.00 hours for this site. Waste disposal measures should be in place.

REPRESENTATIONS

No representations received.

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

It is considered that the proposed development may raise issues relevant to Article 8: The Right to respect for private and family life. Article 1 of the First Protocol: The right to peaceful enjoyment of possessions.

Having considered the likely impact on an individual's Human Rights, and the general interest of the public, refusal of this application as recommended is considered to be justified, proportionate and in accordance with planning law.

CRIME AND DISORDER

The application raises no significant crime and disorder issues.

EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

The application raises no significant equality and diversity issues.

LOCAL FINANCE CONSIDERATIONS

Under Section 70(2) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 the council is required when determining planning applications to have regard to any local finance considerations, so far as material to the application. Local finance considerations are not considered to be material.

RELEVANT POLICIES

North Norfolk Local Plan (adopted December 2025)

SS1 - Spatial Strategy

SS2 - Development in the Countryside

CC7 - Flood Risk & Surface Water Drainage

CC8 - Electric Vehicle Charging

CC 9 - Sustainable Transport

CC10 - BNG

CC12 - Trees, Hedgerows & Woodland

CC13 - Protecting Environmental Quality

HC7 - Parking Provision

ENV2 - Protection & Enhancement of Landscape & Settlement Character

ENV4 - Biodiversity & Geodiversity

ENV5 - Impacts on international & European sites, Recreational Impact Avoidance Mitigation Strategy

ENV6 - Protection of Amenity

ENV8 - High Quality Design

Material Considerations

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF):

Chapter 2 - Achieving sustainable development

Chapter 4 - Decision-making

Chapter 12 - Achieving well-designed places

Chapter 15 - Conserving and enhancing the natural environment

OFFICER ASSESSMENT

Main issues for consideration:

- 1. Site and Application**
- 2. Principle of Development**
- 3. Design and Impact on Landscape and Character of the Area**
- 4. Amenity**
- 5. Highways**
- 6. Biodiversity**
- 7. Conclusion**

1. Site and Application

The application site is located within the village of Thursford fronting Gunthorpe Road. The site is host to undeveloped agricultural land enclosed by mature trees and hedging. Planning permission is sought for the change of use to a dog walking field with associated secure car parking, shed for use by dog walkers, associated vehicular access improvements to serve dog walking field and a car park for Thursford Cemetery.

2. Principle of Development

Policy SS 1 sets out that most of the new development in North Norfolk will take place in the Large Growth and a small amount of new development will be focused on several designated Small Growth Villages. The rest of North Norfolk, including all settlements that do not fall under the above criteria, will be designated as Countryside. Policy SS 2 limits development in areas designated as Countryside to that, which requires a rural location and accords with a list of particular uses, which includes recreational uses.

Thursford has no designated settlement boundary meaning that the site is considered as countryside under policies SS 1 and SS 2 of the Local Plan. The proposal seeks to change the use of an undeveloped agricultural field to a dog walking field with associated structures. Such a proposal falls under the category of recreation and tourism, which is one of the types of development that is acceptable in principle in this location under Policies SS 1 and SS 2, subject to assessment against other relevant policy considerations.

3. Design and Impact on Landscape and Character of the Area

The application is designated as Tributary Farmland within the North Norfolk Landscape Character Assessment and is characterised by generally open and rolling/undulating rural farmland with some elevated plateau areas and a rich diversity of minor settlement, woodland and historic estates. As the name suggests, it forms the catchment area for a number of watercourses feeding into the main river valleys of the Stiffkey, Glaven and Bure.

The site is presently undeveloped and is well shielded by mature trees and hedges along the boundary. The application proposes the construction of a shed intended for use by dog walkers. This shed would be made of timber, standing 2.4m tall, 3.6m wide, and 3.6m deep, and it would be located near the eastern boundary.

In addition to the field shelter, two new wooden gates, each 1.8m high, would be installed to the south of the site, creating a division between the car park and the field. Additionally, a new parking area is set to be established to the south of the site.

The proposed site plan shows that a new wooden fence, standing 1.8m high, would be erected to the east and west, with a native hedge also planned for planting along the western boundary.

The proposed field shelter is viewed as a minor addition to the site and is not expected to negatively affect the character or appearance of the area. Furthermore, the structure would be effectively concealed by the existing boundary vegetation, thus limiting visibility.

In summary, it is considered that the proposed development would not adversely impact the character or appearance of the surrounding area and as such, complies with policies ENV 1 and ENV 8 of the adopted North Norfolk Local Plan.

4. Amenity

Policy ENV 6 states 'All new development will provide for a high standard of amenity including adequate living and working conditions. This standard should be achieved and maintained without preventing or unreasonably restricting the continued operation of established authorised uses and activities on adjacent sites.'

The site is physically separated from nearby dwellings by existing boundaries, intervening land, and established vegetation, which together provide effective visual and acoustic screening. The site provides a sufficient separation distance to the north of 81m and a 134m to the west. The use is low-intensity and recreational in nature, with no permanent buildings or activities that would generate significant noise, or disturbance beyond typical countryside levels. In addition, boundary treatments and landscaping further reduce the potential for overlooking or loss of privacy.

The planning statement provided with the application confirms that group bookings would not be allowed and the field would only be available to individuals. In addition, no lighting is proposed and sessions would be limited to 50 minutes with a ten-minute handover period.

A condition would also be added limiting the use of the site between the hours of 07:00-19:00 to prevent any disturbance to neighbouring properties.

Given the restricted use of the site and separation from neighbouring properties, the proposal is considered not to have a detrimental impact on residential amenity and complies with policy ENV 6 of the adopted North Norfolk Local Plan.

5. Highways and Parking

The site has an existing access point off Gunthorpe Road, which is regarded as a road with very light traffic. The proposed development aims to establish a new parking area for Thursford Cemetery, which is seen as a benefit since visitors currently park on the roadside. However, the dog walking aspect of the application is expected to increase traffic, with vehicles arriving on an hourly basis, and the road network is currently deemed unsuitable for this increase by the Highway Authority.

Gunthorpe Road has a carriageway width of only 2.8 metres, allowing just one vehicle to pass at a time. There are no designated passing areas along its length. The road is unlit and situated away from populated areas, making the proposal heavily reliant on car access. In some sections, grass has begun to grow in the centre, indicating its fragile construction.

At the junction of Gunthorpe Road and North Lane, visibility towards the direction of traffic at the southern end was noted to be only 2.4m x 42m. Given the speed of traffic on North Lane, the Highway Authority suggest that the minimum visibility splays of 2.4m x 120m should be

provided to comply with the national guidelines outlined in the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB).

At the highway junction of Gunthorpe Road and Hindringham Road to the north, visibility towards the direction of traffic was also hindered by hedging, extending only about 17m, while visibility to the non-trafficked direction was limited to just 10m. The Highway Authority has confirmed that their records indicate a documented accident at this junction and has advised that the application be refused, as the proposed development would intensify use on Gunthorpe Road, leading to conditions that would compromise highway safety.

In summary, the unclassified road serving the site is considered inadequate for the proposed development due to its restricted width, lack of passing opportunities, substandard construction, and limited visibility at nearby road junctions. If approved, the proposal is likely to create conditions that would be harmful to highway safety and is therefore contrary to policies ENV 8 and CC 9 of the adopted North Norfolk Local Plan.

6. Biodiversity

Policy ENV 4 states 'Development proposals where the principal objective is to conserve or enhance biodiversity or geodiversity interests of European, international, national and local nature conservation designations will be supported in principle'.

Development proposals will be expected to:

- a) provide a suitable ecological survey to establish the extent of potential impact where there are grounds to believe that ancient woodland, veteran trees, protected species, priority species or priority habitat may be affected during and after development;
- b) retain, protect and buffer ecological and geological features and provide for the appropriate management of those features;
- c) deliver a measurable biodiversity net gain, in accordance with Policy CC 10 'Biodiversity Net Gain';
- d) incorporate biodiversity enhancement features, by designing-in provisions for wildlife, including the provision of nests and roosts; and
- e) avoid the net loss or fragmentation of habitats and support the creation of coherent ecological networks in urban and rural areas and through Nature Recovery Networks.

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) is a mandatory planning approach in England, effective from February 2024, requiring developers to leave the natural environment in a better state than before, with a minimum 10% increase in biodiversity value. It ensures habitats are enhanced or created, aiming for a net positive impact on wildlife.

The proposal constitutes a material change of use from arable land to recreational dog walking which would be classified as grassland, resulting in the loss of an existing arable habitat as defined by the Defra Biodiversity Metric. As Biodiversity Net Gain applies to development involving habitat change, the proposal is liable for BNG requirements to ensure that any loss of baseline biodiversity value is compensated, and a minimum 10% net gain is achieved and secured in the long term.

If the application is to be approved, prior to determination a completed Biodiversity Metric will need to be provided and approved. Subject to the baseline being agreed, a condition will be added to ensure that Biodiversity Net Gain plan is provided before commencement.

Planning Balance and Conclusion

The proposed development is considered to be acceptable in principle and complies with policies SS 1 and SS 2. The development is set within an appropriate rural location for its use and is of an appropriate scale that is not considered to have a detrimental impact on residential amenity.

However, the dog walking aspect of the application is expected to increase traffic, with vehicles arriving on an hourly basis, and the road network is deemed unsuitable for this increase. The road is unlit and situated away from populated areas, making it reliant on car access. In some sections, grass has begun to grow in the centre, indicating its fragile construction. the unclassified road serving the site is considered inadequate for the proposed development due to its restricted width, lack of passing opportunities, substandard construction, and limited visibility at nearby road junctions. If approved, the proposal is likely to create conditions that would be harmful to highway safety and is contrary to policy ENV 8 and CC 9 of the adopted North Norfolk Local Plan.

RECOMMENDATION:

REFUSAL for the following reason:

1. The unclassified road that provides access to the site is deemed insufficient for the proposed development due to its narrow width, absence of passing opportunities, subpar construction quality, and limited visibility at nearby road junctions. If the proposal is approved, it is expected to create conditions that could negatively impact highway safety. Accordingly, it is considered that the proposed development is contrary to policies ENV 8 and CC 9 of the adopted North Norfolk Local Plan.