

BOOST THE BORDERS



By John Lamont MP



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Foreword

My Boost the Borders plan aims to improve digital, physical and social connections across our local areas. It is focused on bringing people together around our shared priorities.

Too often, the Borders has been overlooked by the SNP Government at Holyrood. Humza Yousaf's party ignores our communities at the expense of the central belt. He doesn't pay enough attention to the things that really matter to people in towns and villages across the Borders.

As your Member of Parliament, I will always remain laser-focused on your top priorities. That's why I've developed my Boost the Borders plan to help improve the place we call home.

My plan aims to unite people across the Borders so we can make our local area an even better place to live. It focuses on what we can do to boost digital services, boost transport links, and boost access to local services.

By working together and focusing on what really matters, we can Boost the Borders and make our local area an even more brilliant place to live and work.

Yours sincerely,



John Lamont MP



Digital connections | Boost broadband

The Borders needs better digital services, especially faster internet connections and easier ways to access help online. My plan develops ways we can achieve that.

By boosting broadband and digital access across the Borders, we can make it easier for people to stay connected. We can tackle social isolation. We can help businesses to thrive.

Here's what my plan calls for:

The UK and Scottish governments should work more closely together to expand broadband access. As a Scotland Office Minister, I've been pleased to work with broadband provider GoFibre as they rollout faster full fibre connectivity. We need the SNP to be constructive and work with, not against, the UK Government so we can accelerate access to fast digital networks.

More investment in digital learning spaces for young people and more digital skills courses for all skill levels. I'm proposing greater SNP Government funding so that everyone, regardless of how much experience they have with digital equipment, can access online services. The Borders College has become a powerhouse of innovation and a centre of growth in the tech sector, but I want to see it receive funding for extra student places so more young people can take advantage of digital opportunities.

An urgent government investigation to identify mobile phone signal black spots. In 2024, it's unacceptable that some parts of the Borders still struggle with terrible intermittent mobile phone signals. I'm calling on the SNP Government to review those areas immediately and work with providers to ensure everywhere has a minimum standard of service.

A quick and easy central reporting service for people in rural areas to highlight slow broadband and weak signals. Countless constituents have contacted me to highlight problem areas and I always take their concerns to network providers. But it can be a slow and frustrating process. A central system would help the SNP Government to identify problems and act faster to fix them. Small businesses in our rural economy need good digital access to trade and export.

Expand the 'Connecting Borders' initiative with more government support. The local council pioneered a great initiative in recent years to help vulnerable people and anyone who faces barriers accessing digital services. If funding for local councils was increased, they could expand this programme, which would help to reduce digital isolation and loneliness.



Physical connections | Boost transport links

We need a more reliable and affordable transport network that allows people to get around more easily. My plan includes clear goals to improve our roads and railways.

Investment in local infrastructure is vital to help our economy to grow, bring more jobs to the Borders, and meet net zero targets.

The key transport priorities in my plan are:

Extend the Borders Railway to Hawick, Newcastleton and onto Carlisle. I've been working with the Campaign for Borders Rail to expand the Borders Railway route. We have now reached the feasibility study stage and I'm hoping for a positive outcome. I'm going to keep campaigning for the UK and Scottish governments to collaborate so this ambitious project becomes a reality because better public transport will help to tackle climate change and protect our environment.

Ensure the SNP provides the Borders with our fair share of a national Pothole Action Fund and urge the government to renew the A68 and A7. In recent years, our roads have not received the necessary investment. The council cannot upgrade every route with the poor funding settlements they receive from the SNP. With more funding, our roads could be transformed, which would save motorists a fortune, make car travel safer, and help to build a stronger economy.

Work with the UK and Scottish governments on dualling the A1. There is a pressing need to dual the A1 to reduce traffic, cut travel times and bring more jobs to the Borders. The better our roads are, the easier it will be for Borders-based businesses and farmers to trade their excellent products. If both the UK and Scottish governments focus on working together constructively on shared transport priorities, this long-awaited upgrade can be delivered.

Improve transport links to the Borders General Hospital, the reopened Reston Railway Station and other key locations. Across the Borders, we don't just need better public transport services, we need them to be more joined up. Everyone should be guaranteed access to a speedy bus or rail route if they need to get to the BGH. We must also look to link up transport services so nobody faces long delays or overly difficult journeys.

A full review of bus services to produce a new-age network. In the near future, I believe there should be a full review of local bus services, including trials of potential routes to judge passenger uptake. The council is limited in what it can do while funding from the SNP Government is tight, but local people deserve a service that is fit for the future and, if we are to meet our net zero targets, we need a stronger transport network. A full review would help to ensure the right routes receive funding.



Social connections | Boost local services

As far back as 2000, the Scottish Parliament identified many of the challenges of rural social exclusion, including the disproportionate loss of shops, post offices, bank branches and pubs, difficulties with digital communications and public transport, and problems accessing essential services.

We need to tackle those root causes to prevent isolation in the first place and improve local services so we can increase social connections and tackle ingrained instances of isolation.

My plans calls for the following actions:

Make it a priority to tackle rural social exclusion and isolation. Despite the fact that many of the causes of rural isolation were identified many years ago, not enough has been done to tackle it. Rural workers and farmers have been left in the lurch. My plan calls for a national mission to end the social isolation that plagues so many places in Scotland outside of the central belt. It must be a top priority for the SNP going forward, instead of putting it on the backburner again.

Recruit more GPs and dentists so we can guarantee quick face-to-face, in-person appointments. Our NHS needs more support because when people are isolated, their physical and mental health suffers. For many years, I have been calling on the SNP to bring in a proper workforce plan to attract more NHS staff and incentivise medics in key roles such as GPs and dentists to set up in the Borders.

Update the NHS Recovery Plan to cut down waiting lists. Humza Yousaf's NHS Recovery Plan was supposed to reduce waiting times for GP appointments, dental services, emergency treatment, routine surgeries and referrals for diseases such as cancer. Despite the best efforts of dedicated NHS staff, that plan has failed. I have been urging the SNP Government to overhaul it and commit more resources towards frontline care.

Deliver more affordable housing. People in rural areas of the Borders are often held back by poor infrastructure and a lack of housing options. The SNP Government has cut housing budgets and failed to meet affordable housing targets. I am campaigning for the SNP to invest £50 million through the Rural Housing Fund so we can ensure everyone has the opportunity to own their own home.



Retain bank services and campaign for more access to cash. Big banks have treated loyal customers very poorly. I have campaigned against this mistreatment for many years and I recently joined the national 'Save Our Banks' campaign. My plan would call for no more reductions in bank services and more easy access to cash services for businesses, elderly and vulnerable people.

Empower local areas to protect and enhance their own community. My plan calls for more powers for local people so they can make decisions about what's best for their own towns, villages and communities. There should be more powers for communities to take control of local facilities. I also want to stop SNP Ministers from overturning local planning decisions, so that any projects would deliver clear local benefits to those affected by them.

More funding for councils to restore and revitalise high streets and town centres. The SNP Government should support councils to exempt key local streets from paying business rates. This would help to create jobs, grow our economy, and encourage main streets to flourish. High streets are often the hub of a community and it's important we support small businesses to not only survive but thrive in our local area.

Fully enact the Veterans' Strategy Action Plan in the Borders. The Scottish Veterans Commissioner has noted that while positive steps had been taken, "progress in delivery has been slow" on the Veterans' Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan. My plan would increase targeted investment so the Borders lead the way and offer the best possible support to former members of our Armed Forces and their families.



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BORDERS** 

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