

Enabling Remote Government:

Lessons Learned When Building
a Foundation for Future Innovation



Introduction

As governments around the world began to close their offices at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020, each faced a challenge. The challenge was to continue operating in a remote environment, including processes that typically required face-to-face interactions, whether in person at a counter or on-site for a home visit.

Agency officials rose to the challenge, digitising many operations and turning to technologies ranging from augmented reality and virtual reality to chatbots and video conferencing. As a result, many also discovered an opportunity to realise new and unexpected benefits of online operations, including increased participation in town halls and the ability to serve more constituents given reduced travel time.

[The Gauteng Provincial Government \(GPG\)](#), which serves one of the smallest, but most densely populated South African provinces, spearheaded a digital transformation initiative that came to fruition this year. The government built an online citizen platform based on Microsoft Azure PaaS, Dynamics 365 CE and Office 365 to move away from paper and manual processes and bring all citizen services to a digital platform. The project has been enormously successful, with more than 400,000 residents using the tool.

This eBook explores successful approaches governments worldwide have taken to continue to serve their communities while moving many operations online.

This eBook is for government leaders and administrators who want to learn:

- ✔ **How government agencies worldwide are moving services online**
- ✔ **How to modernise technology platforms to enable remote capabilities and service continuity**
- ✔ **How to reduce administrative time and costs through technologies such as advanced analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), chatbots and more**
- ✔ **How to increase community access, input, information and participation as services move online**

Contents

1 Social care and virtual visits

2 Virtual courts

3 Virtual governance and town halls

4 Remote service delivery: virtual chatbots and assistants

5 Continuity of government operations

6 Modern data platforms and solutions for government

1 Social care and virtual visits

In the first half of 2020, many physical government offices had to close to protect workers and the communities they serve, yet people needed unemployment benefits, temporary housing and financial assistance, food, health services, access to benefits such as public pensions and support for child welfare, senior care and foster families, among other benefits.

The need to continue these services in light of COVID-19-related health precautions prompted agencies to fundamentally change how they practice social work.

Delivering highly personal services in a socially distant environment

Many social workers turned to video conference services to conduct virtual visits. This offered workers visibility into their clients' surroundings and the ability to read facial and body language. It also enabled social workers to prioritise in-person visits where they were still required.

Some populations still require in-person visits, which has necessitated prioritising in-person versus tele- or video conference interactions. According to the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), a chief concern is to safeguard families with risk of family abuse, neglect and domestic violence.¹ [The Birmingham Children's Services Trust](#) also suggests prioritising fostering and adoption situations, residential care and homeless teens.

¹ ['Social Work During Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – Ongoing Survey'](#), British Association of Social Workers, May 2020.

Staying in close contact with those in need

To help staff work remotely, the Birmingham Children's Services Trust has increased its investment in equipment, connectivity and software. Tools such as [Microsoft Teams](#) and [Skype](#) help staff communicate and remain in close contact with clients and each other.

The organisation also captures data on employees' circumstances, including sickness, self-isolation, staff with care responsibilities and staff with health vulnerabilities. Due to Microsoft's secure tools, the organisation can safely store personal information in the cloud. This has allowed the agency to be aware of and responsive to staff well-being as they seek to serve clients.

Technology tools for remote social work

Social services agencies have relied on a few key technologies, including video conferencing software such as Microsoft Teams, to stay connected with co-workers and clients. Additional investments are helping agencies get a better handle on the data they're collecting, making it available for analysis and insights while keeping information protected and secure.

For example, the [City of Espoo](#), Finland, uses a solution hosted on [Microsoft Azure](#) to gather, store and analyse data about how people in the community use various city services at individual and family levels. The solution then creates advanced predictive models that help public servants proactively determine when certain groups may need specific social and healthcare services.



We wanted to use next-generation analytics and AI to better understand the service needs of our citizens and deliver timely unified services.”

Tomas Lehtinen,
Data Analytics Consultant,
City of Espoo

The [Georgia Division of Family & Children Services \(DFCS\)](#) also uses Microsoft Teams to communicate and coordinate with multiple stakeholders. The division convenes teams of case managers, interested parties such as the Office of the Child Advocate, legal counsel and hospital personnel to make decisions related to a child's welfare.

Previously, the process occurred over a series of calls, texts and emails. With Microsoft Teams, case managers can meet in a matter of minutes, so all relevant participants can contribute to the decision.



Using Teams allows us to connect with our families, give them emotional support, ask the questions we need to ask and see the home environment on a much more regular basis, even though we're located in our home office – that is a big deal.”

Sabrina Watson and Rita McLendon,
Georgia Division of Family & Children Services
DFCS



Benefits of remote social services

Remote social services will likely continue after social distancing restrictions are lifted, given their unique advantages. These include:

- ✓ **The ability to expand service to more people.**
- ✓ **Reduction in time and travel costs.**
- ✓ **The ability to reach clients in more rural areas via remote visits.**
- ✓ **Reduction in administrative workload provided by meeting recording and automatic transcription.**
- ✓ **Reduced administrative time provided by online, self-service scheduling.**
- ✓ **Ability for people to self-schedule appointments, securely share documents electronically and other conveniences.**

2 Virtual courts

When the [Philippine government](#) implemented a quarantine to limit the spread of COVID-19, the legal system faced a new challenge: how to ensure justice is served when the people responsible for doing so can no longer gather in the same room. The court system needed to move to a remote government model.

The Supreme Court teamed up with Microsoft to enable video conferencing hearings using Microsoft 365.

The court system immediately saw improvements in efficiency and productivity. In the first nine days of piloting the technology, they were able to release [4,683 people](#), compared with an average of 1,622 per week for the previous six weeks, prior to implementation of Microsoft 365.

Video conferencing hearings are now conducted in Metro Manila and select courts in key cities nationwide. In addition, [the high court allowed](#) the e-filing of complaints, petitions for bail, as well as the submission of requirements for bail to minimise physical contact.

Courts around the world are undergoing similar transformations as they seek to support remote government. They're finding that the benefits of virtual courts go well beyond continuity of operations to include creating new efficiencies and solutions to traditional challenges.



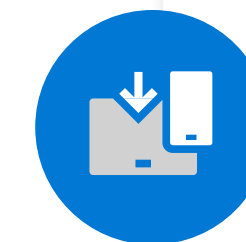
I am so proud to be a part of this historic moment in the Philippines. This is the first time the Supreme Court has moved to a virtual courtroom, to ensure they continue to provide justice and due process during COVID-19. This agility creates government resilience and ensures they remain accessible to citizens and communities during these challenging times.”

Andres Ortola,
Country General Manager for the Philippines,
Microsoft

Digitising outdated operations

Court systems are burdened by new and long-standing challenges, such as a heavy reliance on rigid and time-consuming paper-based processes and procedures.

Courts are beginning to enable e-filing and in some cases mandating its use. By digitising paper-based processes, courts can become more efficient, enable remote processes, provide dashboards for judges and other officials to track proceedings and aggregate document data to generate insights.



Benefits of digitising outdated operations

- ✓ Faster, more secure access to electronic documents.
- ✓ Ability to perform analytics on all court-related data submission.
- ✓ Ability to track processing of documents from a single dashboard.
- ✓ Eliminates the cost, effort and inefficiency of producing, transporting and storing paper.

Sentencing backed by data

Access to data analytics can help judges make fair and just decisions based on the foundations of law. Judges can draw on insights from similar cases to ensure that penalties align with modern ethical expectations, while data from speciality courts can enable more rehabilitative behaviour and address problems at their root.



Benefits of sentencing backed by data

- ✓ Insights into sentencing for defendants with similar profiles can help ensure effective and appropriate sentencing.
- ✓ Judges can confidently apply the correct penalties, knowing that they are backed by data.
- ✓ Historical record of sentences for similar crimes helps ensure consistent rulings.

Trials by video conferencing

Virtual attendance in court has also solved some legacy issues of appearing in person in court. Police officers, for example, often need to provide testimony, but time travelling to and from the courthouse means time not on patrol. Other witnesses have struggled with finding childcare and transportation.



Benefits of trials by video conferencing

- ✓ Easily scalable: hearings are not limited to court room availability.
- ✓ Justice is served more equitably because it's easier to obtain witness testimony.
- ✓ Eliminates the cost and security risk associated with transporting detainees to hearings and trials.
- ✓ Police officers can attend hearings virtually.
- ✓ Prisons can hold virtual visits between inmates and family and visitors.

3 Virtual governance and town halls

Town halls serve an essential government function, allowing city leaders to engage with constituents and hear directly from them on topics important to the community. In the first half of 2020, however, cities had to move faster to shift to town halls online in the interest of public health and safety.

Those who adopted the virtual town hall cited immediate benefits in terms of cost and time. Staff no longer need to locate, set up or potentially rent a venue. Nor do they need to print and prepare display items and materials. Instead, everyone participates remotely and views presentation materials during the event.

Virtual town hall hosts have also seen an increase in participation, with more people able to go online who previously may have had disability, time or transportation constraints. With the town hall available to anyone, there are no longer attendance restrictions due to travel, access or size of the venue.

The following are examples of how government agencies and municipalities have employed virtual town halls to meet participants' needs.

Increasing participation

Even before the pandemic, governments experimented with hosting town halls online and reported higher participation than in-person events.

The [City and County of San Francisco](#) began using Microsoft Teams for its virtual town halls in 2019.

Teams helped the city continue operations virtually in the first half of 2020 and increase participation. As of May, the city had used Teams to support virtual meetings for public health (2,000 attendees), small business webinars (3,000 attendees), a police town hall (500 viewers) and a transit authority town hall (1,000 viewers). More than 22 boards and commissions have conducted virtual meetings.

Agencies can transform nearly any in-person meeting into a virtual town hall. Potential applications include:

- ✓ Public health briefings.
- ✓ Small business or other training webinars.
- ✓ Police, fire or transit authority town halls.
- ✓ School board meetings.

Making town halls more accessible

Many residents find it easier to attend a town hall remotely, as they don't need to work out transportation, find a babysitter or make other arrangements to attend in person.

Virtual town halls also make it easier for officials to join a meeting spontaneously, thus improving the quality of the engagement between government officials and citizens. For example, if a participant has a taxation question, a relevant official can easily join the town hall to address that specific question, something that would be difficult or impossible if the meeting were only in person.

Like the City and County of San Francisco, many agencies have expanded virtual meetings to include public information sessions, workshops and streamed local events.

Earlier this year, the [Parliament of the Maldives](#) began to hold proceedings with the help of Microsoft Teams. Its 87 lawmakers use [Microsoft 365](#), which includes Microsoft Teams video conferencing technology. Lawmakers began to debate and cast votes in real-time over video conference while maintaining social distancing and self-isolation.



Parliaments worldwide cannot just stop representing their people during this crisis. The institutions of democracy must continue to function. The Maldivian Parliament will go on, meeting online and all its work will continue unimpeded.”

Mohamed Nasheed,
Speaker and former President,
Parliament of the Maldives

Best practices for hosting a virtual town hall

Many government agencies and municipalities are sharing best practices for hosting virtual meetings and events. Here are some of their learnings.

- 1. Enable access.** Consider whether your constituency has adequate broadband coverage. Not everyone has internet access. To accommodate people without broadband internet, provide a call-in number so people can listen and participate.
- 2. Test your platform.** Choose a platform such as Microsoft Teams and test it beforehand. The video conferencing platform must be easy to use, be able to accommodate the anticipated number of viewers and allow the meeting host to control the meeting, for example, by determining which participants are muted.
- 3. Monitor and moderate chat spaces.** Assign people to take notes and monitor chat spaces. Some agencies and municipalities may opt to disable the chat function. If they don't, someone should monitor the area as participants share points, reactions and questions. A chat room moderator will need to look for hate speech or abusive language and remove participants if necessary. Another moderator might monitor questions and answer any that panellists do not address.
- 4. Keep legal processes in place.** Adhere to normal, legally required activities, such as posting the agenda, confirming a quorum, recording the meeting and taking minutes. These types of requirements still apply whether you host the town hall in person or online.
- 5. Share guidelines for participants.** Prepare and recite public participation guidelines at the beginning of meetings, with simple instructions on muting audio when not speaking, appropriate tone of language in chat rooms and other requirements for participation.

4 Remote service delivery: virtual chatbots and assistants

In addition to converting many in-person social services visits to virtual visits, government agencies turned to chatbots to respond to record-high levels of inquiries. People have been seeking information about the health crisis, unemployment claims and other essential services.

Most agencies were not equipped or staffed to deal with the rise in inquiries and many turned to chatbots to respond to rising demands.

Chatbots can supplement the activities of agency workforces, making it easier for people to find answers and enhancing the user experience through personalised, 24/7 service. This also frees up social services workers to engage more deeply with citizens and reduces overall workloads. The following are examples of how government agencies have employed chatbots to meet the needs of constituents and workers.

An Accenture survey² of 6,000 people in 11 countries revealed:

- ✓ 78% see benefits to using virtual agents to receive services from government agencies.
- ✓ 47% said they'd like to complete certain transactions using virtual agents.

² ['Citizens Willing to Share Personal Data with Government in Exchange for Enhanced Customer Services, Accenture Survey Finds'](#), Accenture, February 2020.

Chatbots for citizen assistance

Chatbots have become popular across a range of government agencies, including small and mid-size organisations with limited technical resources. Many agencies used chatbots to respond to an increase in public health inquiries in the first half of 2020. For example, the [US Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) used Microsoft's Healthcare Bot service to create a COVID-19 assessment chatbot to screen Americans who may be unsure whether to seek medical care.

Making government services more available

Other agencies have also turned to chatbots, quickly implementing the technology to respond to various community information needs.

The [City of Aberdeen](#) in the UK uses chatbots to answer questions from the community and reduce call volume, including questions related to garbage collection, council tax, road and lighting issues and education. The chatbot has responded to approximately 200 queries per day, freeing up administrative time.

The [City of Kobe, Japan](#), used Microsoft Power Platform to respond to 40,000 daily calls about crisis-related assistance programmes and volunteer opportunities. Using an app that could respond to all but the most complex issues, the city reduced call volumes by 90% while informing and reassuring residents.

Improving services for people with diverse abilities

Chatbots have proven highly effective in communicating with constituents with diverse abilities. Many have the ability to accommodate multiple languages. Several also have read-aloud functions and speech recognition. Still others can recognise sign language. Microsoft has found that when designers create solutions for people with permanent disabilities, it puts people at the centre of the design process and results in designs that benefit people universally.

5 Continuity of government operations

Standard government services that traditionally require over-the-counter or face-to-face interaction – such as property inspections, permit applications, licence applications, tax compliance audits and job search counselling – might not seem like candidates for a virtual visit model. However, as COVID-19 prompted the physical closure of government offices in the first half of 2020, many government agencies responded with innovative solutions to continue services online.

The [government of Malaysia](#), for example, developed a customised solution for the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) that uses Microsoft Azure, Microsoft 365 and Dynamics 365 to process business applications. The ministry can now process up to 2,000 applications a day, an improvement compared to numbers pre-COVID-19.

The following are insights into how government agencies have ensured continuity of operations.

How government agencies are delivering uninterrupted service online

Here are a few other ways governments and agencies have moved operations online:

- ✓ Processing marriage licences online
- ✓ Delivering mental health care via video conference
- ✓ Conducting building inspections remotely for qualifying projects
- ✓ Moving virtual courts and town halls online

Stronger training and recruitment

One of the key areas of improvement for online operations has been training and recruitment. Despite not being able to recruit, screen, interview and train candidates in person, agencies have been able to move forward by using video conferencing technology such as Microsoft Teams.

Agencies are providing experiences through familiar devices and interfaces, allowing virtually anyone with a connected mobile device to participate in remote services while adhering to security and compliance requirements.

Technologies empowering remote government

While some agencies have advanced their services through technologies such as drones and AR/VR, most have relied on a few key technologies, including:

- ✓ Video conferencing
- ✓ Document sharing
- ✓ Screen sharing
- ✓ Instant messaging
- ✓ Self-service scheduling
- ✓ Virtual robotic assistants
- ✓ Online forums

Digital-first services

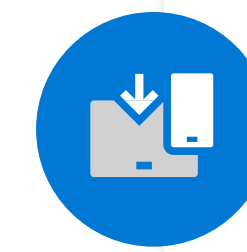
Some agencies are taking a digital-first approach to creating new services. For example, the [City of Cheshire](#), England, integrated a bot into its website that answers queries from constituents. The bot has seen a 500% rise in queries this year on topics ranging from COVID-19 symptoms and social care to taxes and rubbish collection.

[The Salvation Army](#) has also relied on technology to serve populations in need. An international relief organisation, the Salvation Army provides direct, hands-on service to society's most vulnerable. During the COVID-19 crisis, the organisation has continued serving two million people across 60 countries by collaborating through Microsoft Teams.

The Salvation Army uses Teams to convene people quickly and communicate about needs and areas of concern. According to the organisation's leaders, the platform has "opened a new door" by allowing for greater participation and input from more people across more areas of the organisation, compared to traditional methods of meeting and collaboration.

Remote government continues to adapt

Ultimately, the goal of remote government is to continue to serve people without causing unnecessary risk to public health. For agencies looking to adapt their services to a more virtual environment, here is some information to help you get started.



Benefits of remote government services

- ✓ Reduced waiting times
- ✓ More personalised interactions
- ✓ Reduced need to travel
- ✓ Improved access to services for those with accessibility challenges
- ✓ Safety and protection of people and employees

6 Modern data platforms and solutions for government

The quick and massive move of federal workers to remote work in the first half of 2020 put a strain on IT systems. Many government systems were unprepared for the remote workloads.

As a result of COVID-19 and the need to shift to remote services, many agencies worldwide have accelerated digital transformation activities. Agencies have been motivated to gain greater visibility into and control of activities and data. They have also sought to empower government employees to use task-specific applications on-demand from any location, securely, for continuity of services.

The following includes insights on how government agencies are adapting IT infrastructures to accommodate people's needs today.

Making government agile and resilient with modern data platforms

The move to remote work and increased reliance on online services has prompted nearly every organisation in the public and private sector to examine its cloud computing and data management strategies. Many agencies are gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of cloud-computing solutions for their ability to help comply with regulations such as GDPR, and to keep data secure, and prevent data breaches.

Microsoft Office 365, through its [Azure Information Protection](#) capabilities, helps agencies govern and classify data based on its sensitivity. The level of protection follows data regardless of where it's stored or with whom it's shared. This can help colleagues, including those working remotely, share data safely. Data classification also helps to prepare data for compliance review and inspection.

In government agencies, leaders have faced challenges stemming from legacy data systems and analytic solutions that lack scalability and accessibility to workers with various technical sophistication levels. Also, agencies have had to confront the limitation of storing data in siloed, on-premises systems, which hampers analytic insights within the agency and the ability to provide data across the agency for better decision-making. Using solutions such as [Microsoft Teams](#) and [SharePoint](#), government officials can more easily view data together and collaborate, keeping a pulse on critical issues.

The following is a list of cloud computing-related initiatives to consider:

- ✓ **Migrating information and applications to the cloud, for greater security, protection and compliance**
- ✓ **Modernising legacy systems, particularly in the area of cyber-resilience, to create a secure and compliant foundation for the future**
- ✓ **Providing greater access to government services via mobile devices; these services should provide a seamless, user-friendly experience**
- ✓ **Modernising with AI and automation to reduce administrative costs and improve experiences for employees and constituents**
- ✓ **Increasing revenue using advanced analytics**

Advantages of cloud-based data platforms

Many agencies are turning to cloud-based data platforms. Modern data platforms allow agencies to:

- ✓ **Aggregate data from previously siloed locations for a more comprehensive view.**
- ✓ **Make data and insights accessible to a broader range of users through a wider variety of applications.**
- ✓ **Visualise trends.**
- ✓ **Create a foundation for citizen developers to create new low- or no-code applications.**
- ✓ **Benefit from shared responsibility models when it comes to data security and governance.**
- ✓ **Increase device security and management.**

Ensuring continuity with Teams

Following the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, North Carolina's Director of Business Relationship Management ([BRM](#)) noticed a 17% improvement in how quickly the state's BRM team resolved IT tickets. The team coordinates IT service delivery, software deployment and strategic IT investment planning for 380 agencies.

The improvement resulted from the deployment of Microsoft 365 cloud-based productivity tools, which the team had adopted before the pandemic to connect and collaborate virtually. After the pandemic began, the state's 82,000 employees needed to transition to remote work. BRM employees continued to use Teams to plan, coordinate and strategise around the new challenge.

Response, resilience and reimagination: digital government

Government agencies are navigating through three phases following the crisis: respond, resilience and reimagine. A robust data and technology platform can help agencies move through each stage while maximising benefits to their constituents.



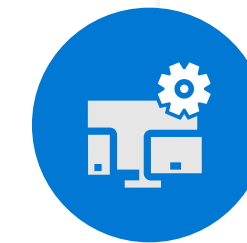
Respond. In the response phase, agencies have had to address immediate priorities to keep employees safe and operations running. Key to this effort has been productivity and collaboration technologies, including secure collaboration and video conferencing platforms.



Resilience. Different regions and municipalities have recovered and strengthened their future resilience at different rates. Still, most have undergone the same process, re-opening government areas at various times, in some cases followed by new lockdowns. In this phase, agencies have supported employees and constituents by transitioning services online with the help of virtual assistants and new low- or no-code apps.



Reimagine. As treatments and vaccines become available, agencies will need to evaluate which online services and newly trialled technologies should remain in place despite workers returning to government offices. At this time, agencies can also begin to imagine what investments, particularly cloud infrastructure and data analytics, will allow their operations to be more resilient in the future.



Benefits of a modern platform

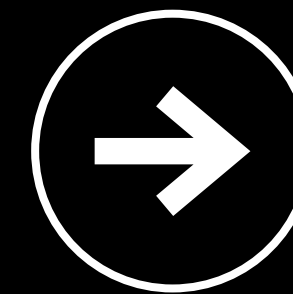
Adopting a modern technology platform offers many benefits, including:

- ✓ **World-class security, protection and compliance.**
- ✓ **The ability to modernise a legacy infrastructure to a flexible, hybrid environment.**
- ✓ **Greater workload capacity when and where needed.**
- ✓ **Efficiencies and cost savings across departments.**
- ✓ **AI-enabled transcription of meetings and hand-written documents to make important information searchable and accessible.**
- ✓ **Data classification to support secure access to data.**
- ✓ **Support for hybrid scenarios, where agencies can pull data from multiple sources with precise levels of security and controls.**

Moving forward

A modern technology platform can provide a foundation for innovation for years to come. Whether an agency employs AR and VR for training or digitises processes typically conducted face to face in city hall, investments in digital transformation will continue to benefit agencies and communities in the future.

To learn more about how you can help your organisation become more resilient and to reimagine government operations, consider these resources.



[Learn more about enabling remote government access >](#)

[Download the Enable Remote Government infographic >](#)

