



# Frontline Staff versus Online Procedures

## *An Investigation of the Digitalisation of Local Governments through a Case Study in Yasu City (Shiga Prefecture, Japan)*

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Received 2 July 2023 | Accepted 18 November 2023 |

Published online 15 April 2024

### Abstract

In recent years, Japan's central government has taken the lead in actively promoting the digitalisation of local governments, an effort further accelerated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Digitalisation in public administration is advantageous for most but not all residents. Through the conventional person-to-person service window that could act as a safety net, public servants could easily understand the challenges of the residents. This is not possible anymore with digital administration processes. For this reason, there is some criticism regarding the central government's efforts to digitalise the system, claiming for example that the central government is only prioritising the digitalisation of procedures at the counters and does not consider the issues that may arise in the digitalisation process, such as maintaining the safety net function without personal interaction. This article investigates the response to digitalisation by focusing on cases in which generous services were provided through window operations amid the digitalisation of local governments in Yasu City, Shiga Prefecture. The study shows that the situation of residents with difficulties in their daily lives can be understood better at the counter with face-to-face communication and that substantial support is needed. The introduction of digitalisation has its advantages, but careful institutional design is necessary, as some residents may be overlooked.

## Keywords

digitalisation – window operations – face-to-face communication – needs – inclusive society – digital gap

## 1 Introduction

Currently, Japan's central government is taking the lead in promoting digitalisation in public administration, particularly introducing digitalisation in window operations (*madoguchi s̄abisu* 窓口サービス), which is one of the main targets and contentions in the initiative for digitalisation in local governments. In this article, I focus on this effort and examine through a case study how digitalisation is being introduced and used in the actual field.

I start with explaining the background to the introduction of digitalisation into the window operations in public administration. One of the main challenges in Japan today is to cope with a declining and ageing population while both the central and local governments are facing huge budget deficits, as well as realise economic and social growth and development while transforming and adapting the economic and social systems that have been established to date in the face of these developments (Ota 2022). The rapidly advancing digitalisation is the key to pursue these goals, and the central government has set out to realise them through the application of digitalisation to all aspects of the economy and society at large. This is stated in the Fifth Science and Technology Basic Plan (*Dai 5-ki kagaku gjutsu kihon keikaku* 第5期科学技術基本計画) presented in 2016, which sets out the goal of pursuing and realising Society 5.0, meaning a “super-smart society” (*chō sumāto syakai* 超スマート社会) (Naikaku Fu 2016). Subsequently, while experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, the central government sought to realise this vision and created the Digital Agency (*dejitaru chō* デジタル庁) with one mission: to promote the digitalisation of the public administration sector on the Plan in 2020, as will be discussed below (Dejitaru Chō 2023).

In many cases, local governments conduct formal procedures, such as obtaining and submitting documents required for procedures related to residence certificates, tax payments, and childcare support. Residents must submit their documents in person during operating hours. It would be convenient for residents if these procedures were digitised, hence allowing applications to be submitted online anytime. It would be useful for local governments as well, as it would allow them to reconsider counter staff allocation and reduce personnel costs. The importance of digitalisation in window operations has been

widely understood since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some researchers have argued that the indiscriminate digitalisation of systems brings about significant challenges.

I focus on the window operations of local governments – which are currently the main targets of digitalisation efforts in Japan – examine the status of the introduction of digitalisation and the related on-site responses, and consider the issues raised from these responses. In tackling this theme, I focus on the case of Yasu City 野洲市, Shiga Prefecture 滋賀県, where I conducted qualitative interviews with the local administration staff. Yasu City has attracted attention in Japan for its efforts to provide livelihood support to residents in need, including those with multiple debts, through co-operation between the city government and relevant local organisations and lawyers. City government window operations support these initiatives. Understanding the introduction and response to digitalisation in Yasu City's window operations provides important insights into the situation and problems of marginalised groups (such as older adults or people with lower economic status) within the so-called “digital society,” and how digitalisation should be implemented in accordance with an inclusive society avoiding the digital gap.

## 2 Trends in the Digitalisation of Local Governments

Digitalisation is currently underway in Japan's central and local governments. As mentioned earlier, this initiative is set against the backdrop of the declining birth rate and ageing population as well as the huge budget deficits of on both governmental levels. The central government has indicated that it aims to maintain the level of public service supply while addressing these problems by making services more convenient for residents. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) (*sōmushō* 総務省), which is responsible for the local administrations, has announced that it will actively promote digitalisation in local governments in response to this central government policy (Jichitai senryaku 2040 kōsō kenkyūkai 2018a; 2018b; Chihōjichitai ni okeru gyōmu puresesu·shisutemu no hyōjunka oyobi AI·robotikkusu no katsuyō ni kansuru kenkyūkai 2019), with the COVID-19 pandemic having spurred the central government's efforts (Chihō seido chōsakai 2020). Both the central and local governments were aware that they were lagging behind the so-called digital transformation, regarding, for example, the weak or lack of digital infrastructure, fax and stationary phones instead of e-mails, *hanko* 判子 (seal stamps) instead of digital signature, etc.

The most recent scenario is described below. After setting the above policy from 2018 to 2019, the Abe Cabinet presented and Suga Cabinet revised the Digital Government Action Plan (Dejitaru gabamento jikkō keikaku デジタル・ガバメント実行計画) in 2020 to promote full-scale and concrete digitalisation in the central and local governments (Shushōkantei 2020). After making this plan, the Digital Agency was created in 2021. The plan sets out user-centred reforms as a policy for introducing and promoting digitalisation in the administrative field. It includes specific details for each ministry and agency and the procedures to be digitised, as well as a list of points to be considered when handling personal information. The plan also puts forward policies to improve convenience for citizens using public services and ensure proper protection of personal information while considerably reducing costs for providing such services. This policy also includes the creation of new value and economic stimulation through the open use of government data. Building on the government's previous digitalisation policy, the plan lists the operations to be digitised and the objectives of the plan, including the aim of stimulating the economy by digitising the administrative sector as well as other specific details and objectives that had not been clearly stated in previous plans. For example, the plan aims to make it possible to use the so-called "My Number Card," a type of identity card that enables official documents, such as residence certificates, to be obtained at convenience stores instead of government offices, tax payments to be made on the web, and more. It can also be used as a health insurance card (Sōmushō hōmupeji 'Mai nanber kard' n.d.). Therefore, when "My Number Card" is widespread in Japan, governments will be able to reduce the number of personnel hitherto required to complete these procedures and reassign them to other departments where they are needed. The plan also upholds that by digitising information and data, the latter can be made widely available to both the public and private sector, and data analysis can be carried out jointly by the two sectors so as to understand the state of economic activity, identify areas of growth and those requiring support, and formulate new policies.

Window operations are the main target for digitalisation in this plan, involving formal procedures at their core. The plan lists a group of procedures to be promoted in areas handled by the central ministries, such as those related to tax payment (handled by the National Tax Agency) and childcare, especially child allowance (administered by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare), and indicates that local administration will follow suit in the digitisation of these procedures (Shushōkantei 2020: Ch. 12). The plan identifies two main areas of procedures to be promoted online by local governments: a) procedures with a large number of cases to be processed and which are considered

highly effective in improving convenience for residents and work efficiency when conducted online, such as tax-related procedures (e.g., local tax returns), reserving books for lending in local public libraries, or reserving the use of cultural and sports facilities; b) procedures considered necessary to provide a type of one-stop shop for the many measures that exist for the residents' lives, including those related to childcare, nursing care, and support for victims in the event of a disaster. The plan identifies fifty-eight procedures that should be digitised. In response, the MIC presented the Digital Transformation (DX) Promotion Plan for the local governments (*Jichitai dejitaru・toransufōmēshon* (DX) *suishin keikaku* 自治体デジタル・トランスフォーメーション (DX) 推進計画) (Sōmushō 2020), which lists priority issues to be addressed in promoting digitalisation of local governments as well as the necessary support measures for local governments to proceed with the digitalisation.

According to MIC data, in the Financial Year (FY) 2020 there were 469.4 million cases of these fifty-eight procedures, including 248 million online cases, with an online utilisation rate of 52.8 per cent. The online usage rate for these procedures was 44.8 per cent in 2017, 45.4 per cent in 2018, and 50.8 per cent in 2019 (Sōmushō 2021; 2022), indicating an increasing rate of online usage each year. These data describe the most recent trends in digitalising local governments, led by the central government. These initiatives are part of the administrative reforms that the central government has been promoting since the 1980s, and digitalising local governments can be placed in this context.

Administrative reform in Japan is characterised by the national government's central role in promoting such changes, including initiatives to open public administration to the private sector, such as privatising public enterprises and outsourcing various administrative tasks to the private sector. Criticisms have been levelled at some of these initiatives, such as reforms that erode the philosophy of local autonomy, as it is recognised that some aspects of these initiatives have been undertaken without sufficient explanation to the residents. In recent years, the administrative reforms promoted by the central government have also been pointed out as public service(s) "industrialisation" (*kōkyō sabisu no sangyōka* 公共サービスの産業化), and the digitalisation of local governments has been cited as one of these initiatives (e.g., Okada 2019). More than forty years ago, the economist Miyamoto Ken'ichi 宮本憲一 pointed out that Japan is a corporate state (*kigyō kokka* 企業国家) as a characteristic of Japanese capitalism (Miyamoto 1981). The administrative reforms that have been undertaken since the 1980s, with the aim of opening up the administrative sector to the private one, and the digitalisation of the administrative sector currently being promoted by the central government, are trends that indicate that Japan is still a *kigyō kokka*.

### 3 Discussions on Digitising Window Operations

As previously mentioned, one target for digitalisation in local governments is window operations, which refers to procedures performed by residents at the counters of each department when visiting a local or central government office; thus, they cover a wide area. In many cases, the various procedures carried out at the local government offices are formal and require visits during fixed weekday hours, that is, when the counters are open to the public. Surveys have shown that residents are dissatisfied with aspects of window operations, such as having to visit the counters even if they are close, long waiting times, and complicated procedures; thus, window operations have long been mentioned as a target for improvement (e.g., Ōwada 2021). Although it was already understood by the central government, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 highlighted that there are many challenges in traditional window operations, which are based on face-to-face contact (Shushōkantei 2020: 5–7).

In fact, the central government had been actively promoting digitalisation of local governments before the pandemic. The MIC had been conducting demonstrations for local governments to introduce digitalisation into their window operations, and some local governments participating in these projects or conducting demonstrations themselves had reported results in terms of reduced work time, such as a significant reduction in the time spent dealing with the counter (e.g., Igarashi 2020; Iwasaki 2020).

Thus, while introducing digitalisation in window operations has advantages for residents, local governments, and the central government, and has come to be strongly recognised as necessary with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, criticism and concerns have been raised about the active promotion and the central government's methods for proceeding. Kubo Takahiro 久保貴裕 (2020; 2021), a researcher of All-Japan Prefectural and Municipal Workers Union (*Jichirō* 自治労), the largest industrial union of local government workers, raised an important point of contention regarding window operation, stating that even formal procedures are an important opportunity for the administration as they enable staff to understand the residents' situation(s) and need(s) through face-to-face communication at the counter. In particular, being able to ascertain such specific needs during the course of a procedure allows staff to provide more appropriate public services to residents with problems, such as by guiding them to the appropriate department within the local government, which can be a safety net for residents. The concern in such cases is that if the procedures carried out at the counter were to be digitised, the local government could no longer fully grasp the residents' different situations – and thus the safety net function would no longer be fulfilled. These concerns raise

important issues for the central government's initiatives, which only further emphasise the necessity and benefits of digitalisation.

Window operation in public administration has long been the focus of policy theory, particularly in public administration studies. A representative argument is Michael Lipsky's (1980) "street-level bureaucracy" with the viewpoint of "the dilemmas of the individual in public service" – expressions used in the very title of his book. One of the most eminent political scientists, Lipsky focuses on civil servants in professions that come into direct contact with citizens, such as caseworkers, police, and teachers, acknowledging the important public services provided by such civil workers. They make discretionary decisions when confronting citizens and offer individualised services that are diachronically under-resourced and sometimes under-supplied due to insufficient personnel and the need for providing individualised services according to citizens' situations (Lipsky 1980).

I must also consider the arguments of Mayama Tatsushi 真山達志, a public administrative scholar who paid attention to Lipsky's positions. Mayama (2001) has argued that it is necessary to separate planning and formation from implementation in policy-making, and that frontline staff are important in both aspects. It is important to understand the residents' needs in the implementation aspect as well as reflect this in planning and formation while maintaining an awareness of the various issues. He has also pointed out that policy formation with frontline staff at the core is required in an increasingly decentralised society and is important in keeping municipalities functioning effectively (Mayama 2018; 2020).

Regarding the administrative reforms centred on state-led private sector outsourcing and privatisation, Mayama has stated that although local governments are expected to develop their own policy-making capacity in the future, if private sector outsourcing is used for window operations where important information can be obtained, it could affect the policy-making capacity of staff working in the field as they will not be able to obtain the information they have been able to do so in the past. (The government also states that there is a problem with state-led initiatives being carried out without the residents [Mayama 2018: 1–2].) He has not previously expressed a view on the progress on digitalisation of local governments; however, if I correctly understand that this initiative is being pursued as part of administrative reforms with private outsourcing and privatisation at its core, then it is clear that the same problems occur. This is the same concern expressed by Kubo (2021: 51–55). Although Kubo does not refer to Lipsky's and Mayama's arguments, it must be noted that they both share the understanding that window services are important. It is also key to acknowledge the similarities in their concerns that the current state of affairs may change significantly as digitalisation is implemented.

It must be emphasised that the central government mentions both the necessity and the benefits of digitalisation. Although various documents presented by the central government introducing digitalisation of local governments state that it will digitalise window operations and reassign staff who were previously in charge of those operations to “specialise in operations that can only be performed by staff” (Jichitai Senryaku 2040 kōsō kenkyūkai 2018b: 29), there is no description of the specific content and areas of these operations. In this regard, an MIC official expressed the view that window operations should be divided into “procedural operations” and “consultation operations,” and that efficiency should be improved by digitising the former and allocating more personnel to the latter (Ueda 2019: 14–16). However, there was no clear explanation of how “consultation work” would be carried out when the “procedural work” is digitised, or how would all be structured.

#### 4 Outline of Yasu City and Its Efforts<sup>1</sup>

Yasu City is located in the southern part of Shiga Prefecture and has good rail access to Ōsaka City 大阪市 (about sixty minutes) and Kyōto City 京都市 (about thirty minutes) via the JR Tōkaidō 東海道 Line, making it a commuter city for these major cities. Its industries include agriculture and manufacturing, especially production of electrical machinery and equipment (Yasushi hōmupeji ‘Shi no shōkai’; Yasushi seisaku chōseibu kikaku chōseika 2021). As of March 1, 2023, there are 50,628 residents – with the population remaining around that figure in recent years (Yasushi hōmupeji “Jinkō·setaisuu” 2023).

Yasu City has attracted attention for its comprehensive support efforts for residents with multiple debts and those facing difficulties in their daily lives. One key element of these efforts is that the support is provided via the city government’s window services through collaboration with the relevant departments within the city government, the unemployment office, social welfare councils, and non-profit organisations (NPOs) – these services are termed “citizen’s life counselling” (*shimin seikatsu sōdan* 市民生活相談). These efforts have already attracted some attention in recent years (Utsunomiya 2014; Shōzui 2017; 2020; Kubo 2020; 2021).

1 The “Outline of Yasu City and Its Efforts” and “Digitalisation in the Citizen’s Life Counselling Division” sections are based on the results of interviews with Okada Norihito 岡田憲人, a staff member of the Citizen’s Life Counselling Division (CLCD) (*shimin seikatsu sōdanka* 市民生活相談課), conducted on August 5, 2022, as well as documents provided by the City Administration.



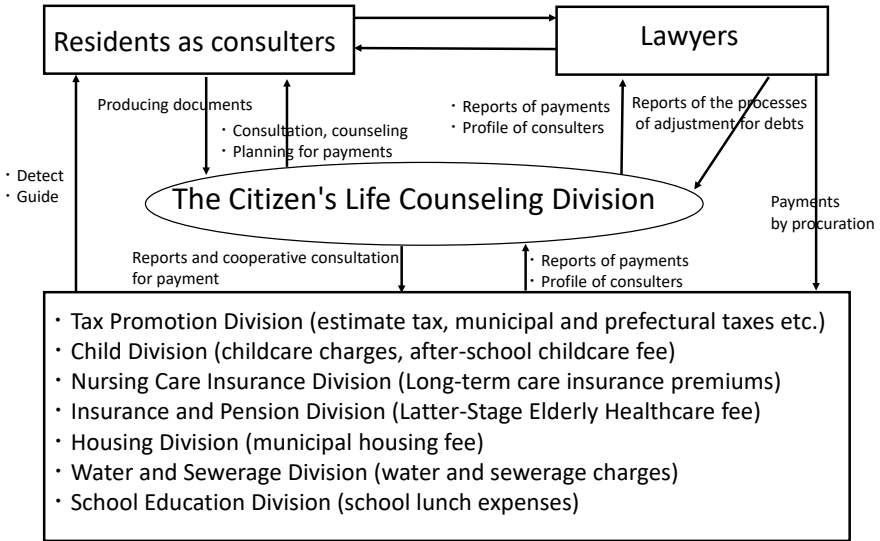


FIGURE 1 The scheme of Comprehensive Support Project for Multimodal Debtors (*tajūsaimusha hōkatsu shien purojekuto* 多重債務者包括支援プロジェクト) in Yasu City

Yasu's efforts began in 1999, when a consumer consultant was assigned to Yasu Town before the latter was merged in 2004 with the neighbouring at the time Chuzu Town (Yasushi hōmupeji 'Shi no shōkai'). The number of consultants subsequently increased to two, a liaison council on measures against multiple debtors was established, and a comprehensive support project for multiple debtors was implemented. In 2013, the CLCD was established by upgrading the office that handled consumer consultations. It was selected as a national model project to expand the range of support and establish a system of co-operation with relevant departments in the city government office building. In 2016, the city enacted the Yasu City Life Support Ordinance (*Yasushi kurashi sasaeai jōrei* 野洲市暮らし支えあい条例), which institutionalised the city's support for socially vulnerable residents who have difficulties in their daily lives.

Figures 1 and 2 contain overview diagrams of Yasu City's efforts. Figure 1 illustrates the support provided to residents with multiple debts and Figure 2 the system for persons in need. Although these systems, tasks, and goals of the city government divisions as well as organisations and councils outside the city government are different, the procedures to be followed in the institution are the same. The CLCD works with the city departments that have jurisdiction over areas of the residents' daily lives to identify those who are unable

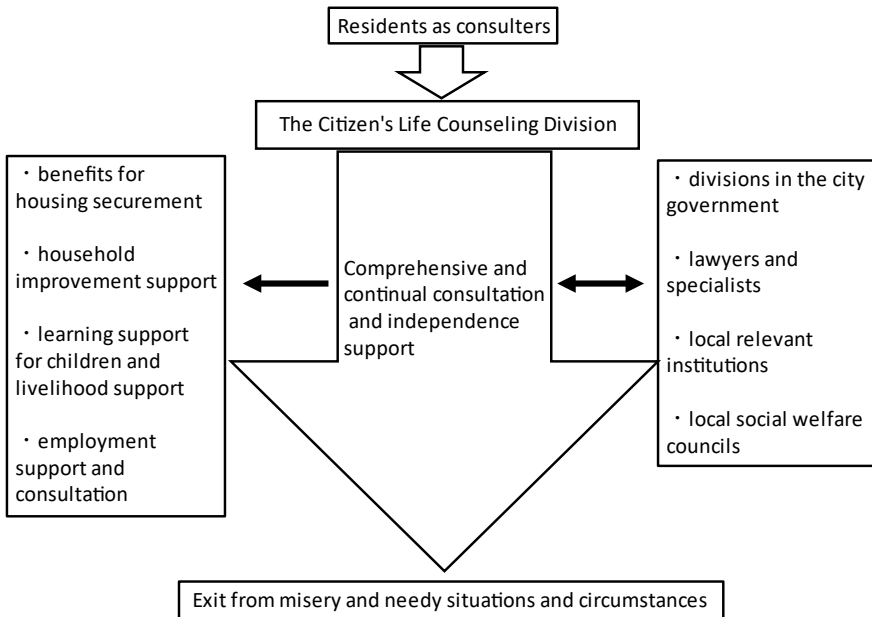


FIGURE 2 The outline of Yasu City self-reliance support system for people in need (*seikatsu konkyūsha jiritsu shien seido* 生活困窮者自立支援制度)

to pay their taxes, utility bills, etc. If the departments are able to identify such persons, they are directed to the CLCD for consultation. And subject to the resident's consent, the CLCD is in place to provide support in co-operation with institutions and organisations outside the city government, such as social welfare councils and legal professionals.

Figure 3 shows the operational structure of the CLCD, which functions as a contact point. As of FY 2020, there were three regular staff members, one consultant for consumers, and four consultation assistants. Of these, four were employed via central government subsidies. They provided advice to socially vulnerable residents, work in co-operation with local organisations and institutions to support their employment and livelihoods, and bring them into contact with these schemes.

In this way, the city has the CLCD at its core, which establishes contact with the residents in question. Their individual situations can be assessed by the staff members at the windows, which makes it easier to provide them with the assistance and offer them the necessary support for the divisions and sections that handle various procedures. For example, when a resident in difficult living conditions visits a window for childcare-related procedures and the division ascertains that s/he is indeed in a difficult situation, s/he is guided to the

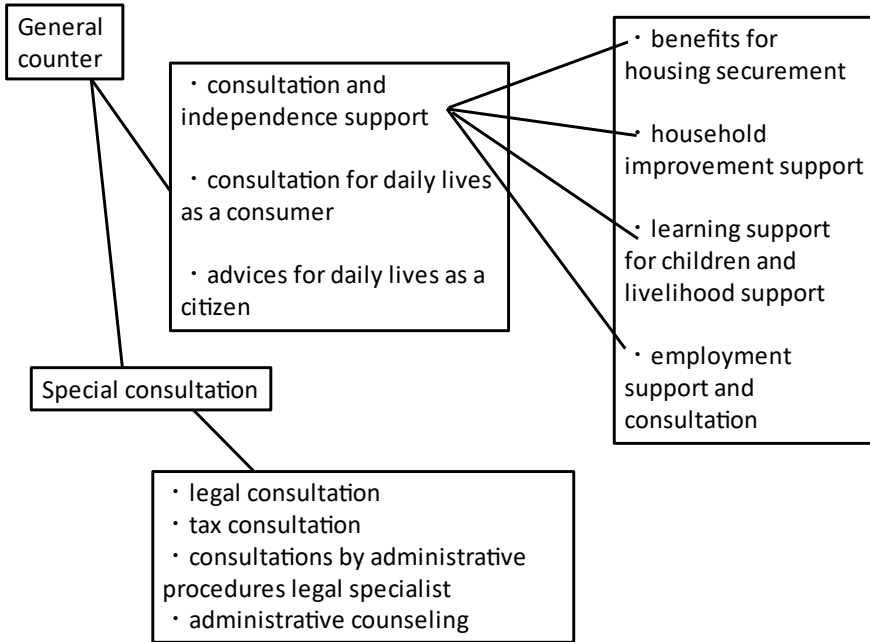


FIGURE 3 CLCD operations

CLCD, and if her/his difficult livelihood condition is verified, then the CLCD becomes the nucleus of divisions related to water and other utility bills, education, and other divisions. The support organisations and institutions outside the city government also share information in co-operation with departments that deal with or are related to the issues faced by residents and set up a system to provide co-operative support.

The city's approach also considers and works with unemployment and family problems, which further contribute to issues related to multiple debts and impoverishment. The diagrams of the city projects and efforts handled by the CLCD indicate where efforts related to employment, livelihood support, and learning support for children are included (Figures 2 and 3). As mentioned above, this section was established in the course of developing and expanding efforts that began in 1999. Through a series of activities, the department has come to realise that these issues are at the root of people's multiple debts or difficult living situations, and that it can help them address these underlying problems – they have decided to tackle these issues by providing support (Shōzui 2020).

I confirmed the achievements of these efforts. From 2010 to 2021, the city recovered approximately 534 million yen for redress of residents who had been victims of fraudulent business practices through the city's support system in

the course of providing consultations on consumer affairs, and recovered approximately 313 million yen in overpayments for debt repayments over the same period.

However, these efforts are limited as the city has not been able to identify all residents who are experiencing difficulties in their daily lives. The city government is often able to identify such residents through the process of formal procedures at city office windows or when residents consult with the CLCD. However, residents who are in a state of social recluse (*hikikomori* ひきこもり) tend to have difficulties going out, and the city government is not able to identify them as they cannot visit the city government to carry out formal procedures such as paying water bills or paying taxes. The fact that these residents are unaware that they may be eligible for support might also be a reason for the difficulty in identifying them.

## 5 Digitalisation in the CLCD

The CLCD provides in-person consultations as well as complementary online ones and interviews. Like other cities in Japan, Yasu City also developed a plan for digitalising the city administration and is currently working on digitalisation under the Second Comprehensive Administration System Overall Optimisation Plan for Yasu City (*Dainiji Yasushi sōgō gyōsei shisutemu zentai saitekika keikaku* 第二次野洲市総合行政システム全体最適化計画), formulated in 2018. This plan aimed at improving citizen services through streamlining operations in each department, including simplifying administrative procedures, obtaining documents through the use of integrated circuit (IC) cards, and more (Yasushi Jōhō Shisutemuka 2018).

However, the city administration has not made much progress in digitalisation efforts. If the city administration would try to standardise their administration systems, it would take a lot of time to understand which parts can be standardised and which ones require to keep each departments' own systems. Moreover, it is necessary to establish a system to check this process, but there is no room for the city to secure staff that will devote time to such matters with all the daily workload, nor can the city finances afford to allocate personnel to such tasks. Similarly, the implementation of full digitalisation in the city government would involve significant costs for the required changes in the administration systems, but the city's finances do not allow such developments.<sup>2</sup>

The CLCD faces the same issues, and efforts to address each of the items set out in the plan have yet to be realised. Efforts to support residents in difficult

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<sup>2</sup> From the interviews with Okada, staff member of the CLCD (August 5, 2022).

situations were mainly based on face-to-face interviews and consultations through carrying out procedures at the window. However, equipment enabling online interviews and meetings has since been introduced, which has proven to be effective in supporting residents. One example is the establishment of a system for online interviews and meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed online sessions with residents who were in a state of social seclusion and unable to leave the house. The traditional in-person system made it difficult to reach such residents, something that the online system allowed the CLCD to do so. Additionally, meetings with more distant city government branches are held online, and officials feel that this has been effective for such discussions to take place quickly without the need for travel time.

Thus, whereas the CLCD focuses on traditional face-to-face interviews and consultations, online services were introduced as complementary to these traditional modes. Although digitalisation is being slowly introduced for the reasons discussed above, accompanying the existing system with online services has enabled the provision of support even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 6 Discussion

CLCD efforts have been implemented to support residents in need, with in-person-based counter services at the core, and the Division has introduced equipment that enables online interviews and consultations to be conducted with residents who have traditionally been difficult to meet face-to-face. It should be noted that the Yasu City government digitalisation efforts tend to be slow and have not been actively introduced in the CLCD. Subsequently, the following two suggestions may emerge from the city's efforts to support residents in a situation where the central government is taking the lead in digitising local governments.

First, face-to-face interviews and consultations are fundamental to understanding and supporting residents' lives in difficult situations. Even if digitalisation has proceeded, there has been no significant change in the approach taken regarding CLCD window operations. Meetings and discussions with organisations and institutions are conducted online, but window operations with residents remain primarily at the CLCD and the counters of the other departments. This shows that window operations are essential for the in-person implementation of a safety net function, as pointed out by Kubo (2020; 2021).

The digitalisation of local governments envisaged by the central government ensures that only procedures with a clear purpose are carried out

digitally, such as obtaining a certificate of residence or paying property tax. In other words, the central government envisions a relationship in which the administrative services required for residents with “a need” are clear, and the relationship between a resident’s “need” and the administration is direct; this is where digitalisation is being actively introduced currently.

However, this is not the situation assumed by the Yasu City Life Support Ordinance, which is the result of Yasu City’s efforts so far. The CLCD and the other departments that work with this institution are trying to understand the residents’ challenges and situations while formal procedures are carried out to grasp the “needs” that the targeted residents potentially have.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, the city government does not approach its counter services with the assumption that it is only a one-to-one relationship procedure responding to a resident’s “need.” The resident may have “a need” and may have come to the counter for a simple procedure, but the city government has a system in place to identify and respond to potential “needs.” This is why the city government’s counters, with the CLCD at their core, are considered to fulfil a safety net function.

Second, one of the tasks that “only staff can do” by digitising local administration is livelihood support for residents in difficult circumstances, which lies at the core of the CLCD in Yasu City.

The situations of residents in difficult living conditions, as identified through procedures such as paying taxes and utility bills, are not uniform, and the underlying circumstances and factors vary – thus, the support being provided also varies (or must vary). Yasu City’s efforts show that, when providing support to these residents, it is necessary to learn about their individual circumstances via in-person consultations (including online ones, if possible) and consider how to respond to these problems. It is a necessary step for people such as municipal staff and advisers who can subsequently intervene based on their specialist knowledge and provide face-to-face consultations, thereby responding carefully to the situation. I believe that such responses will make it possible to ensure that institutional support and initiatives set up by central and local governments are properly delivered to those who need them.

If dealing with these issues is a task that can “only be done by staff,” then the ongoing digitalisation of local administration poses a major challenge as

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3 The fact that the CLCD and other sections of the city government are working to understand the situations of residents in need in their daily lives through dialogue and that, in addition to these procedures, counter staff make decisions and direct the residents to other departments means that these residents potentially need multiple administrative services, regardless of whether they are aware of it or not. In such cases, it is appropriate to consider them as “needs” rather than “a need.”

it is being proactively introduced into counterwork, where the situation of residents is being assessed. This is consistent with the challenges identified by Kubo (2020; 2021). It is important to consider how to prevent neglecting persons in need when procedures are mainly performed online automatically rather than individually and in presence. Yet, past documents from the central government and MIC do not provide details on specific measures to ensure that this does not occur. The idea of separating the procedural and consultation work described by MIC official Ueda (2019), and assigning staff to the latter is one way of handling the situation. However, how to both prevent either type of work from being overlooked and guide eligible residents to the latter must be considered. For example, there is a big challenge in situations where people also have difficulties with procedural work processes, such as older adults who often have weaker digital competencies and are unable to cope adequately with digitalisation. As I mentioned above, Ueda presents an argument assuming that these people will also be addressed by “consultation services,” but does not analyse the specifics of how this will be done. This case study of Yasu City suggests that it is necessary to provide a service to inform these residents on digitisation via public presentations, and guide them to come directly to the counter. It is quite difficult for the city administration to identify residents who are unable to go out and receive information or come to the counter and ask for help, as the residents do not understand that they themselves are not fully aware that there are administrative institutions to support them in such situations. In addition, sometimes they do not know exactly what it is like to be in a difficult living situation or to be left behind in an increasingly digital world – these are major challenges that need to be properly addressed.

It is difficult to identify all the residents who could be eligible for assistance at the various departments of the municipal administration – such as the CLCD – which is one problem encountered in the city’s approach. This will remain an issue even if digitalisation is introduced, and will require careful handling depending on how it will be introduced.

Mayama (2001; 2020) noted that frontline staff are important actors in planning and shaping aspects of policy and its implementation, and that it is important to understand the residents’ needs and their “voiceless voices,” and subsequently reflect them in all aspects of the policy process. If digitalisation is introduced in a situation in which counters are one channel for understanding the residents’ needs on the implementation side of this cycle, the channels originally necessary for policy shaping and formulation will be transformed. This would not be a major problem if opportunities to understand the needs of the population would have been ensured in some way, as has been the case in the past. However, there is still no mention of a response to this problem, at

least in the national documents promoting the digitalisation of local administration, remaining therefore a significant issue.

## 7 Conclusion

This case study focused on the digitalisation of local governments, which is currently being promoted by the central government in Japan. I investigated and examined the current status of the introduction and use of digitalisation in the field of window operations in Yasu City, which is one of the main targets for introducing digitalisation in window operations. The city's support to residents in difficult situations in their daily lives is set off via window operations, a process that has attracted attention nationwide. The CLCD, which is responsible for this effort, has continued to use face-to-face interviews and consultations at its core, while introducing online equipment to conduct digital ones as well; digitalisation has been effective in complementing the traditional approach.

The CLCD's efforts to support residents with in-person consultations have two implications for the central government's efforts to actively introduce digitalisation in local governments, particularly in counter services, where many formal procedures are carried out. First, it is important to provide face-to-face consultations to understand and assist residents in difficult circumstances. Second, facilitating support for the lives of residents in difficult circumstances is one of the tasks that can "only be performed by staff" – the latter should be accordingly specialised as a result of the digitalisation of local governments, something Yasu City is focusing on. In light of the above, the concern that digitising window operations may result in overlooking residents in need of support is valid, and concrete measures to address these issues have not yet been presented. I believe that there are issues with the central government and the MIC's efforts to actively promote digitalisation without presenting concrete measures to address these potential problems. There is also concern that if digitalisation eliminates or reduces the counter services residents have had until now, opportunities for frontline staff to understand the residents' needs and develop their skills in policy-making and formation based on those needs will be lost. The reasons for this are the following:

Regarding promoting digitalisation in the government, there are benefits on both the administrative and resident sides, as the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted. However, the central government should not blindly promote digitalisation but should also examine the system and structure to properly identify residents who have problems, and present a model to



local governments. Moreover, such efforts are also necessary because Japan is pursuing sustainable development goals (SDGs), the core principle of which is that “no one is left behind.”

Finally, there are some issues that could not be fully addressed in this study. First, Yasu City plans to promote and implement digitalisation in the city government. Presently, the city as a whole is lagging behind in introducing digitalisation, which is why the CLCD is one of the key institutions for supporting residents. If online applications are introduced in the relevant departments in the future, it is conceivable that the window operations that were the catalyst for this initiative will be weakened. Considering that traditional initiatives have been effective to a certain extent, it is important to strike a balance between face-to-face-based initiatives and the introduction and progression of digitalisation. One way to do this would be to place traditional initiatives that have already achieved results at the core and introduce digitalisation as a complement to those initiatives. It is necessary to constantly review the efforts of Yasu City in the context of digitalisation progress.

In addition, while this study focused on the implementation of policies by frontline staff in Yasu City, it was not possible to examine policy formulation and formation by the frontline staff responsible for this effort. Challenges remain in this respect, and the importance of this issue is likely to increase in the future, given the progress in digitalisation.

At present, this is only a case study, and it will be necessary to verify the status of the introduction of digitalisation in other municipalities and their responses to it in the future. Clearly, it is essential to accumulate case studies on the digitalisation of local governments based on the suggestions obtained through the case of Yasu City.

### Acknowledgements

This research received funding from a grant from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Shizuoka University in 2021 and 2022 and by the JSPS KAKENHI (Grant Number 19K12577). I would like to thank the Yasu City Citizen's Life Counselling Division for their generous support and help in providing valuable information and important sources. I would also like to express my thanks to the 18th Conference of the German-Speaking Association for Japanese Studies (18. *Deutschsprachiger Japanologentag*) and the international workshop “Digital Transformation in East Asia, the Impact on Economy and Society Digitalisation in Transformation,” organised by the University of Bonn.

I am particularly grateful to Nishiyama Takahiro for his assistance and valuable suggestions, and to the referees for many helpful comments.

### Abbreviations

CLCD	Citizen's Life Counselling Division
FY	Financial Year
MIC	Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications
NPO	Non-profit organisations
SDGS	Sustainable Development Goals

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