

Transforming government for the digital age

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in
Advance of the 2020 Budget

By VFS Global

List of recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The government should work with the private sector to significantly invest in digital solutions to passport and immigration services so that Canadians and those wanting to come to Canada can benefit from shorter wait times.

Recommendation 2:

The government should implement a pilot project to collect biometrics of in-country permit and visa holders who need to extend their permits and visas to ensure the security and integrity of Canada's immigration system.



Transforming government for the digital age

In today's interconnected world, advanced technology and digital applications provide innovative solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing governments. Canada is no exception when it comes to the services the government provides its citizens both at home and abroad.

The government's [Digital Operations Strategic Plan](#) outlines principles around which the federal public service deals with digital transformation, service delivery, security, information management and information technology. These include a user-centred approach to a service-oriented government that puts citizens first while providing real-time information to Canadians about their service applications; "an open, collaborative and accessible government that is accountable to Canadians, shares information with them, engages users in policy development and service co-design, and works with inclusion and accessibility in mind" and a "digital-first and digitally enabled government that is available anytime, anywhere, with services and information provided through multiple windows and service channels."

As the government acknowledges in its strategy: "This is a tall order. ... [However,] implementing this agenda is crucial to ensuring that the Government of Canada is able to meet the needs and expectations of Canadians in the years ahead."

If the government wants to serve Canadians the best way it can, it must embrace digital solutions that ensure efficiency, safety and privacy are paramount and work with partners that can help the government meet its goals.

About VFS Global

VFS Global has been the service provider for the Government of Canada since 2005 and currently operates 129 Visa Application Centres in 91 countries. We are the world's largest outsourcing and technology services specialist for governments and diplomatic missions worldwide, serving 62 government clients in 143 countries with 2,997 Application Centres. Having processed more than 189 million applications since 2001 in addition to collecting more than 74 million biometrics enrollments, we feel we can be a strategic partner of the Government of Canada when it comes to enhancing passport and immigration services.

Our breadth of reach into global economies at a time that trade and exports are critical to Canada is unique. By virtue of how and where it delivers the contracted services, VFS Global understands the intersection of key elements of the Government of Canada's security and economic agendas. This geographic positioning provides VFS Global with a close up understanding of, and insights into, local conditions in all of the markets it is active in. VFS Global has developed many strategic observations in these markets which it believes could be of value to the Government of Canada given its broader agenda.

VFS Global's commitment to environmental stewardship

We strive to act as a good corporate citizen, who takes into account the current and future economic, social and environmental impacts of our business activities. We acknowledge and live up to our responsibility to support sustainable development of our business in a manner that is congruent with and not detrimental to the overall interests of society at large. In order to ensure effective management of our company's corporate responsibility, we are committed to:

- Integrating our corporate responsibility principles in our core business operations
- Seeking an open and transparent dialogue with internal and external stakeholders
- Continuously seeking ways to improve our sustainability performance
- Preserving the environment (climate change and natural resources)
- Working towards general social development
- Ensuring strong governance
- Maintaining internationally accepted standards and guidelines

Since 2012, VFS Global in partnership with myclimate, a Swiss non-profit organization engaged in climate protection, has been committed towards offsetting the carbon footprint of business travel.

We have been ISO 14001 certified for more than 6 years, taking various initiatives to ensure we as an organization leave positive impacts on the environment.

How we can partner with the government

We're pleased to participate in the Budget 2020 process and make the following recommendations to ensure that Canada's economy and government remains competitive and agile through innovative digital technology. VFS Global has the experience, expertise and the technology to enhance customer experience with passport and immigration services, while addressing national security concerns.

Safe and secure digital solutions to passport and immigration services

In the last two decades, the world has fundamentally changed because of the increase of disruptive technologies — they're changing the way we work, live and play. Gone are the days when governments only provided analogue services, in which correspondence was conducted through the mail, on paper and within set hours in a physical office building.

Technology has allowed us to have more information at our fingertips more quickly and more efficiently and Canadians expect their government to keep with the changing and evolving times.



Now more than ever, the more digital and tech-savvy governments are, the more satisfied citizens are with the services they receive.

“Computers and smartphones have become ubiquitous in our society, which has enabled real-time connectivity that links people to information instantly. According to Statistics Canada, the internet usage of Canadians of all ages has risen significantly over recent years, with most Canadians now using the Internet frequently or daily,” the Digital Operations Strategic Plan notes. “This connectivity provided by the Internet and mobile devices has meant that the public have come to expect information to be at their fingertips, available instantly, from any device and at any time.”

The need for better digital solutions can be seen in passport and immigration services.

As Canadians face longer queues and wait times for passport services ([currently 10 to 20 business days](#) depending on if an applicant goes in person to a passport office in limited areas of the country or mails their application), VFS Global has innovative solutions to assist the government in completing applications in a timely and efficient manner. By government partnering with VFS Global, applicants can benefit from flexible ‘prime time’ services so that applicants can make submissions beyond regular office hours and Saturdays, an application tracking facility from the time the application is submitted and a dedicated email for applicant queries. In addition, Canadians overseas can use one of our full service Passport Application Service centres to apply.

On the immigration side, VFS Global is proud to be able to provide improved efficiencies and turnaround times at zero cost to the federal government because of our technological innovations to immigration services. This includes an electronic application and processing system; online payment, appointment scheduling; biometric solution and enrolment; and a dedicated website and call centre. We have the infrastructure with capabilities to manage multiple projects and greater accessibility through wider geographical coverage which allows government officials to focus on what they do best — decision making.

In today’s digital age, VFS Global has a robust privacy framework. We make the security of data a priority, having been certified ISO27001 for information security systems. While very few and far between, we are committed to keeping clients fully informed of any security incidents.

“Services provided by the private sector have become faster, better and more responsive, from e-commerce next-day delivery to smartphone ride-hailing or 8-minute automated mortgage approvals to applications that have real-time status updates for pizza orders. Expectations of government services are not static, and as external services become easier to use, citizens expect government services to follow,” the Canadian government’s digital strategic plan says.

In order to meet the needs of its citizens, the government must offer more digital services and invest in technologies that allow faster delivery and communication.

Recommendation 1:

The government should work with the private sector to significantly invest in digital solutions to passport and immigration services so that Canadians and those wanting to come to Canada can benefit from shorter wait times.

Requiring in-country biometrics important security issue to address quickly

Since 2018, the Government of Canada has required that all people applying for a visitor visa, a work or study permit (excluding U.S. nationals), permanent residence or refugee or asylum status give biometrics as part of their application regardless of which country they're applying from. These biometrics must be given before applications are processed and expire after 10 years.

Once applications are approved and visas are granted, those who reside in Canada do not have to give biometrics in subsequent applications to extend visas and permits because there is currently no infrastructure to conduct biometric intake in Canada.

In a press release outlining the 2018 changes, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada said:

Accurately establishing identity is an important part of immigration decisions and helps keep Canadians safe. For more than 20 years, biometrics (fingerprints and a photo) have played a role in supporting immigration screening and decision-making in Canada.

Canada currently collects biometrics from in-Canada refugee claimants and overseas refugee resettlement applicants, individuals ordered removed from Canada and individuals from 30 foreign nationalities applying for a temporary resident visa, work permit, or study permit.

Biometric screening has proven effective in protecting the safety and security of Canadians and the integrity of the immigration system. Systematic fingerprint verification allows border service officers to confirm a traveller's identity and better manage traffic flow at the border. This will in turn make international travel a convenient, predictable and secure process for travellers with genuine identities.

Not requiring biometrics from those in-country once they expire, however, is a gap that could affect the security and integrity of Canada's immigration system. This needs to be addressed quickly.



Because of VFS Global's experience and existing infrastructure within Canada, we could support the federal government on a pilot project to integrate in-country biometrics immediately.

Recommendation 2:

The government must consider a pilot project to collect biometrics of in-country permit and visa holders who need to extend their permits and visas to ensure the security and integrity of Canada's immigration system.

Conclusion

In today's digitally connected world, it's not a surprise that "Canadians want and deserve programs and services that provide the best experience for them, when and where they need it, and in a client-centred manner." In order to serve Canadians best, the government must be able to transform its operations to meet this need.

At VFS Global, we utilize technology and government partnerships to provide a better visa application experience for citizens — all through secure digital platforms and providing innovative solutions for public service challenges. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Budget 2020 process.