Bhutan's e-Government Transition: Progress, Gaps, and the Path Ahead

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Introduction

A bakery owner expected the transfer and renaming of her business licence to take one or two days. Instead, the process lasted three to four months. She moved between the trade and revenue offices, learned about the tax-clearance requirement only after she had started the application, and had to ask a friend in Thimphu to make a payment and send a screenshot that she could show to an officer as a proof of payment.

Parts of the process were digital, but she still had to carry documents and payment evidence, coordinate between agencies and find people who could keep the case moving (Zhabtog Lekjur, 2026).

Her experience highlights a pivotal stage in Bhutan's public sector evolution. Bhutan has successfully brought over 120 services online, rolled out cutting-edge digital identity infrastructure (Bhutan NDI), expanded connectivity to 88 percent of the population, and established accessible Community Centres across gewogs (a Community Centre, in this context, is a public service facility, typically located at the gewog centre, that provides internet access and assists citizens, especially those with limited digital literacy or access, in using online public services).

For a developing country characterised by rugged geography and scattered mountain communities, Bhutan's achievement is commendable. However, as e-government matures, and people's expectations increase, the definition of success evolves.

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Hosting a service on a portal or accepting an online form submission is fundamentally different from delivering a seamless, end-to-end digital experience, where identity verification, data sharing, payment, and approval operate as one coordinated system.

Through *Zhabtog Lekjur* (the Holistic Public Service Delivery Project), Bhutan is taking its next big leap - moving from simply putting services online to making them work effortlessly for every citizen.

Evolution of e-Government in Bhutan

Bhutan has been developing online public services for more than two decades. Early electronic clearances and the Government-to-Citizen (G2C) initiative (Dorji, 2014) showed that technology could reduce travel, make information easier to access and help people follow required procedures.

They also revealed problems that remain familiar today, such as repeated document requirements, incomplete online processes, limited payment options and government applications that could not easily exchange information (Miyata, 2011; Wildermuth and Suberi, 2017). The Digital Drukyul flagship programme later placed complete online journeys, digital identity and better coordination across government at the centre of reform (Tenzing, 2020).

The government has invested in service portals, agency-specific applications, digital identity, online payment facilities, data exchange and community centres. Ministries and agencies remain responsible for delivering their respective services.

Shared digital infrastructure provides reusable functions such as identity verification, online payment and data exchange across government systems (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and GovTech Agency, 2024).

Citizens may access services through the Citizen Service Portal, agency websites or mobile applications. Those who require assistance can visit a Community Centre, contact the toll-free Public Service Contact Centre,

or seek help from the Integrated Service Centre, a dzongkhag help desk or an agency counter.

For a developing country, these sustained investments have yielded tangible dividends. The 2026 Public Service Satisfaction Survey highlights this progress. Despite the challenges, 78 percent of households reported that public services have improved over the past five years. Furthermore, digital services earned an impressive overall rating of 4.09 out of 5 from citizens.

Bhutan NDI has already reached over 338,000 registered users and connected to more than 100 services, while the 2025 inventory by the Public Service Delivery Division (PSDD) under the Prime Minister's Office recorded 121 fully online services and 182 hybrid services.

The 2025 in-house service inventory, prepared by the Public Service Delivery Division, provides the broadest administrative picture currently available. It contains 568 service records. Of these, 191 were recorded as offline, 182 as hybrid and 121 as online. Another 74 had missing, unclear, or inapplicable delivery classifications.

Of the 121 online services, 93 online services were linked to the Citizen Service Portal (www.citizenservices.gov.bt) and 26 to agency-specific applications (Public Service Delivery Division, 2025b).

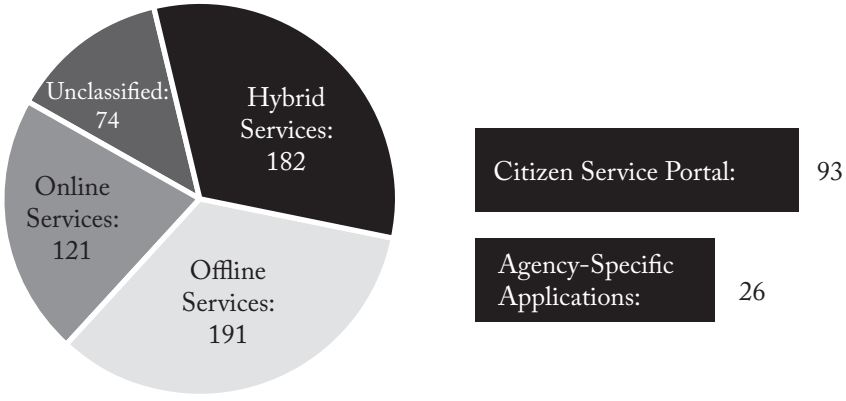


***Figure 1**. 2025 in-house service inventory (PSDD, 2025b)*

These milestones demonstrate that Bhutan's digital vision is delivering real value. At the same time, the Government's online services have not been able to keep pace with the rapid digital developments globally, and the increased expectation of the people who are used to global apps. These challenges are the natural friction points of a rapidly expanding e-governance ecosystem.

Current Challenges and Issues

Bhutan's e-Government system presents a mixed landscape. First, services are at different levels of digital maturity (Public Service Delivery Division, 2025b). Second, people use a combination of websites, mobile applications, offices and assisted service centres when accessing public services (National Statistics Bureau, 2026).

For example, a person may begin an application online but later seek assistance through a Community Centre, the Public Service Contact Centre at 1199 or an agency office when identity verification, payment or another part of the transaction fails. From the user's point of view, these are not separate channels but connected stages of one service journey (Scholta *et al.*, 2020).

While the 2026 Public Service Satisfaction Survey shows that most households believed that public services were improving, the accessibility score was 3.81, and fairness of access across different digital channels scored 3.30, which was the only pillar classified as "average" (National Statistics Bureau, 2026).

The 2026 survey also found that 68 percent of households selected office visits as a preferred access point, compared with 47 percent for online access, 29 percent for Community Centres, and 18 percent for mobile applications (National Statistics Bureau, 2026).

This shows that a clear majority of Bhutanese citizens still prefer visiting offices for availing of services. This could be due to either a lack of digital literacy, or difficulty in availing themselves of online services, as these are not user-friendly, or do not provide end-to-end service, as in the case of the bakery owner.

Only about 19 percent of households reported using official government websites for service information. In comparison, 67 percent used social media, 53 percent relied on friends or family, and many also used community meetings, television or radio.

Around 50 percent of the respondents were aware of the Citizen Service Portal, while 25 percent reported that they were aware of the portal and had used it. Nearly four in five people who had used the portal rated their experience positively (National Statistics Bureau, 2026).

Identity verification and login problems create another barrier. Enquiries related to Bhutan NDI reached 7,496 in 2024 and 7,939 in 2025 (Public Service Delivery Division, 2025a). These included questions about registration, receiving credentials, facial verification, wallet access and logging in to connected services.

A review of 134,193 records from the '1199 Public Service Contact Centre' found 54,822 entries that mentioned a possible digital service problem. Of these entries, 29,532 related to login or identity verification, while 10,373 concerned online payment issues.

Most respondents completed the service in one attempt, but a sizeable minority still needed repeated follow-up. In a smaller study by the Public Service Delivery Division, about 84 percent of respondents completed a service in one attempt, and 73 percent were satisfied or very satisfied.

At the same time, one in five needed at least three visits, calls or follow-ups, and more than one quarter reported a problem with the internet, portal or related system (Public Service Delivery Division, 2026).

The 1199 call-log review identified 5,589 coded records referring to failed transactions or incomplete applications, most of them involving payments that had not been completed. Payment-related references increased from 10.1 per cent of all coded records in 2021 to 21 per cent in 2025 (Public Service Delivery Division, 2025a). These figures are not confirmed failure rates, but they show that payment problems appear frequently in requests for help.

An analysis of the toll-free call logs identified 28,846 coded records involving some form of manual intervention. These included password resets, re-initiating payments, manual verification and referrals to focal officials (Public Service Delivery Division, 2025a). The records do not represent unique system failures or a failure rate; they indicate how often staff intervention appeared in requests for assistance.

A passport applicant received a rejection message that did not explain what needed to be corrected. In such cases, before the application could be completed, the applicant had to make telephone calls, re-submit a photograph, follow referrals, visit an office or seek help from another person (Zhabtog Lekjur, 2026).

Between 2025 and 2026, the Integrated Service Centre provided assistance on 3,113 occasions for passport applications, family-tree requests, security clearances, online payments, land tax and digital identity.

Together, these findings and the wider literature suggest that online services can save time and reduce travel, but they can also create new burdens when requirements are unclear, information must be provided more than once, or failures are difficult to resolve (Moynihan, Herd and Harvey, 2015; Peeters, 2023).

Offices and assisted service centres remain important because many people use them alongside digital channels (National Statistics Bureau, 2026). Their value, however, depends on whether they are connected to the same service process. A citizen moving from a website to a Community Centre, a toll free number or an office should not have to restart the application or provide the same information again.

These channels should function as connected points of support, not as separate workarounds for failures elsewhere in the service journey. Improving only the online step will, therefore, solve only part of the problem.

Field researchers observed officials moving service information between paper registers, spreadsheets, official applications, telephone calls and messaging groups. In some cases, the same information was entered more than once because earlier records were not available in one place (Zhabtog Lekjur, 2026). This manual coordination helps explain how a service

can appear digital to the applicant while still depending on fragmented processes behind the screen.

Reimagining E-Government in Bhutan.

1. From Vertical Silos to an Integrated Public Service Portal

To understand where public service delivery in Bhutan currently encounters friction, it is helpful to distinguish between two broad approaches to government technology.

Vertical systems are standalone digital applications developed by individual ministries or agencies to manage their own sectoral responsibilities — for example, land administration, taxation, or business licensing. These systems are often necessary for administrative modernisation, but when developed in isolation they can also deepen institutional fragmentation.

Horizontal integration, by contrast, refers to the shared digital architecture that enables separate systems to function in a coordinated way. This includes capabilities such as single sign-on, common payment gateways, and automated data exchange across agencies. Its importance lies not only in technical interoperability, but in its capacity to present government to citizens as a more coherent whole.

As in many countries, Bhutan's early e-government efforts focused on digitising individual departmental mandates. This was a necessary first step, but it also produced a fragmented service environment in which citizens are often required to move across multiple portals, registration processes, and support channels depending on the transaction. Because interoperability across ministries remains incomplete, the experience of public services still mirrors underlying institutional silos.

In this context, the move towards stronger horizontal integration - and towards access through a single government portal or super app - should be understood not merely as a technical improvement, but as an administrative reform with important implications for accessibility, efficiency, and trust.

The concept of a single government portal, however, requires precision. At its simplest, a portal may serve as a central source of information and links.

At a more advanced level, it may offer a common entry point through shared authentication, payment, notification, and tracking functions.

At a deeper level, it may support secure data exchange across agency systems, reducing the need for citizens to submit the same information repeatedly. These are not minor design variations; they reflect different ways of addressing the problem of fragmented service delivery.

From a citizen's perspective, a trusted single access point offers clear advantages. A common login reduces repetitive registration, while shared payment and tracking functions can make services more predictable and easier to navigate. Bhutan's planned enhancement of the Citizen Service Portal and the development of a more citizen-centred ePortal (GovTech Agency, 2026) point in this direction.

Yet centralising access also introduces new risks. A major technical failure or cybersecurity incident could affect multiple services at once. The effectiveness of a single portal, therefore, depends not only on interface design, but also on robust maintenance, strong security, and clearly assigned responsibility for platform governance.

A mobile-only approach may also exclude those less confident in using applications. This remains salient in Bhutan, where national survey findings indicate that mobile applications are still less widely preferred than offices, websites, and Community Centres (National Statistics Bureau, 2026).

Bhutan, nevertheless, has important enabling conditions in place. Internet use has reached 88 percent, while Bhutan NDI had more than 338,000 users and was connected to over 100 services at the time of a recent assessment.

The most practical model is, therefore, not a single monolithic application replacing all existing systems, but a recognisable public front door connected to multiple agency-specific platforms behind it. Delivering such a model requires reusable shared services for identity, payments, and data exchange, together with common service standards, clear ownership, and coordinated incident management (Janssen and Estevez, 2013; Asian Development Bank, 2025).

International experience is instructive not because it offers templates for direct replication, but because it highlights adaptable design principles.

The United Kingdom's GOV.UK shows how one recognisable public website can provide a coherent user-facing layer even when departments continue to operate separate internal systems. Its Design System promotes consistency in presentation, while the Service Standard sets wider expectations for service design around user needs (Government Digital Service, no date a; no date b).

Estonia's once-only principle seeks to ensure that citizens do not have to provide the same information repeatedly to public authorities, supported by X-Road, which enables secure data exchange across authorised systems (European Commission, 2016; e-Estonia, no date).

Singapore's LifeSG offers a further lesson by organising services around life events rather than administrative boundaries, while still linking users to the responsible agencies and systems (Government of Singapore, no date).

These examples and Bhutan's own experience suggest three priorities: Establishing a recognisable and trusted public entry point; strengthening interoperability among the systems behind it; and assigning clear responsibility for the complete end-to-end service journey. Assisted channels should also be able to resolve problems without requiring citizens to start again elsewhere.

A common government portal could advance these aims by making services easier to find, more consistent to use, and less fragmented in their presentation. Its real value, however, will depend less on the portal itself than on whether the systems, institutions, and support arrangements behind it function as an integrated service ecosystem. The test of success is not whether services appear in one place, but whether citizens can complete them simply, reliably, and seamlessly from beginning to end.

2. Zhabtog Lekjur and the Transition to Citizen-Centred Service Delivery

With the launch of Zhabtog Lekjur, the ongoing Holistic Public Service Delivery Project, the country is moving beyond incremental adjustments towards a broader, more citizen-centred rethinking of how public services are designed and delivered. Jointly led by the GovTech Agency and the

Public Service Delivery Division under the Prime Minister's Office, the initiative suggests a maturing approach to governance reform, one that places the lived experience of citizens and businesses at the centre of administrative change.

What distinguishes Zhabtog Lekjur is its focus on understanding services as they are actually experienced, rather than as they are formally structured within government. By examining the full service journey across multiple dimensions - what citizens see, how they interact with public institutions, and the systems and processes operating behind each service - the project is better positioned to identify the sources of delay, confusion, and unnecessary burden.

This is significant because many service delivery reforms fail precisely by addressing visible symptoms without resolving the institutional and procedural causes beneath them. The engagement of Quicksand, a firm specialising in human-centred design and innovation, reinforces this orientation. Its structured research across selected dzongkhags and thromdes, covering more than 89 services and identifying 60 for phased improvement, indicates an evidence-based approach that has often been missing in service reform efforts.

The project's ambitions are correspondingly significant. Zhabtog Lekjur aims to simplify service journeys, reduce unnecessary documentation and office visits, improve coordination across agencies, and promote common service standards alongside reusable digital components. Importantly, it also seeks to connect digital, physical, and assisted service channels.

This recognises that seamless public service delivery in Bhutan cannot be achieved through digital interfaces alone, but must reflect the varied realities of citizens, including those in remote areas who continue to rely on assisted access points such as Community Centres. In this respect, the project offers the possibility of narrowing the gap between Bhutan's growing digital infrastructure and the quality of service that citizens encounter in practice.

As Zhabtog Lekjur moves from discovery and early design into blueprinting, prototyping, and implementation planning, it presents a meaningful opportunity to redefine expectations of public service delivery in Bhutan.

If its recommendations are adopted and carried through by the responsible agencies, the likely gains would be tangible - fewer procedural steps, shorter waiting times, clearer information, and more reliable services. These are the practical markers of a state that works effectively for its people. Seen in this light, Zhabtog Lekjur is more than a discrete reform initiative; it represents a broader commitment to a form of governance that is responsive, inclusive, and institutionally durable.

Conclusion

For the bakery owner, better public service would not require a dramatic super app. It would mean knowing the requirements before starting, having her tax status verified through the relevant government system, making payment once, and tracking her application through a clear reference number. If a problem arose, it would be resolved by the responsible institution rather than left to her to navigate across offices and systems on her own.

Bhutan has already made important progress. More services are now available online, and the GovTech Agency continues to strengthen key elements of digital public infrastructure, including digital identity, payment systems, and data-exchange platforms. Agency-specific applications are also being improved, while assisted-access channels remain important for those who need support in completing services.

The evidence further suggests that many citizens value digital services and perceive public services to have improved. Yet the availability of online services, while significant, is not by itself an adequate measure of digital government. The more meaningful test is whether people can identify the right service, understand what is required, complete the process with reasonable effort, and receive the intended result without unnecessary delay or confusion.

A common government portal could make services easier to find and more consistent in presentation. Its effectiveness, however, will depend on whether the applications, institutions, and support channels behind it are also connected.

Processes need to be reviewed, responsibilities need to be clearly assigned, and Community Centres, toll-free contact points, help desks, and agency counters need to support the same service journey rather than function as disconnected points of assistance. In this regard, the launch of Zhabtog Lekjur offers a credible path forward.

By examining services as citizens actually experience them - and by redesigning journeys across people, processes, and technology - it addresses many of the gaps identified in this article. If its recommendations are implemented by the responsible agencies, the bakery owner's experience could become meaningfully simpler within a realistic time horizon.

Disclaimer: Sithar Norbu currently serves as the Chief Programme Officer at the Public Service Delivery Division, PMO, while Tshering Cigay Dorji serves as a Commissioner at the Royal Civil Service Commission. The views expressed here are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisations they serve.

Declaration: AI tools were used to assist in refining the language of this article; however, the ideas, arguments, and substantive content are authors' own.

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