

What's in store for local government

Dr Lollie Mancey

Head of Innovation, Instech.ie



Futureville shows us that the future is not built in labs.

It is built in:

➡ Planning offices

➡ Local authorities

➡ Health services

➡ Transport systems

➡ Community decision-making

Public servants are not passive recipients of the future.

They are its architects.

Why the Public Service Is Different

AI leadership in the public service is not the same as AI leadership in the private sector.

Public servants are not optimising for profit.

They are stewarding:

- Public trust
- Collective resources
- Democratic legitimacy
- Long-term societal outcomes

That means the margin for error is smaller, the consequences longer-lasting, and the accountability non-negotiable.

In the public service, **every automated decision is also a moral decision.**

Responsibility Does Not Disappear It Concentrates

One of the most dangerous myths about AI is that it somehow dilutes responsibility.
In public service contexts, the opposite is true.

AI:

➔ Speeds up decisions

➔ Standardises outcomes

➔ Reduces friction

But responsibility still rests with the human.

We have spent a decade talking about digital transformation as if it were a systems upgrade. It is not. It is a **shift in how power, judgment, care, and responsibility are exercised.**

AI does not arrive neutrally. It arrives carrying values, assumptions, blind spots, and speed. Leadership is the deciding factor in whether it amplifies harm or human potential.

AI does not arrive neutrally

The question is not — will AI be used?

The question is —> **who gets protected,
who gets optimised,
and who gets forgotten?**

AI is not the future. **It is already embedded unevenly.**

- The risk is not that leaders move too slowly.
The risk is that they move **unthinkingly**.
- Most organisations are adopting tools faster than they are developing **judgment**.

If an algorithm contributes to:



A housing allocation



A risk assessment



A welfare eligibility decision



A service prioritisation

Then leadership must be able to explain:

- Why that system was used
- What data it relied on
- What safeguards were in place
- Where human oversight occurred
- You cannot outsource accountability to a system.

From Authority to Stewardship

Old Model

- Authority through expertise
- Control through hierarchy
- Confidence through certainty

Emerging Model

- Authority through judgment
- Control through governance
- Confidence through transparency

Public service leaders are becoming **stewards of socio-technical systems**, not just managers of people and processes.
That is a different skill set.

Why Explainability Matters in the Public Service

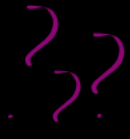
In public life, decisions must be:

- Explainable to citizens
- Defensible to oversight bodies
- Auditable over time
- Understandable in plain language

If a leader cannot explain a system's role in a decision,
that system does not belong in public service.

What “playing with AI” actually means

- Exploring tools in **non-decision-critical contexts**
- Stress-testing outputs with human judgment
- Learning where AI is strong and where it reliably fails
- Building organisational intuition before scale

Play is how humans learn safely.
So why do we deny it in organisations? 

Three Ways You Can Innovate Without Breaking the System

1. Shadow Experimentation (Safe Zones)

- Use your “play with AI” section here
- Non-decision environments

2. Pilot with Purpose

- Small-scale, high-learning pilots
- Designed for policy feedback, not just delivery

3. Translate Upwards

- Feed real-world insight back into government

AI Literacy as a Leadership Capability

**Not Technical Fluency.
Civic Fluency.**

AI literacy means:

- Knowing what AI can and cannot do
- Understanding probabilistic systems
- Asking better questions, not better prompts
- Recognising where human judgment must remain final

The Quiet Risk: **Moral Deskillling**

There is a subtle danger here that rarely gets named.

When systems:

- Rank cases
- Score risks
- Recommend actions

Humans can slowly stop practicing moral reasoning.

This is not laziness. ————— It is cognitive offloading.

Over time,
organisations risk:

- Losing ethical reflexes
- Becoming dependent on machine logic
- Confusing consistency with fairness

AI will not decide the future of leadership.
Leaders will decide the future of AI.

The real question is not: → How fast can we adopt?
→ How cheap can we automate?

The real question is:

→ **What does good human leadership look like when we are no longer the only 'intelligence' in the room?**

Mindset Shift — Why This Is Hard

The deepest challenge is not technology. **It is identity.**

Leaders are being asked to:

- Admit uncertainty
- Learn in public
- Share authority with systems they did not design
- Let go of the myth of total control

That is emotionally demanding work.

But leadership has always been about navigating uncertainty.
AI just makes it impossible to pretend otherwise.

CASE STUDY

ESTONIA

What Happens When a State Designs for Digital First

Built a fully integrated digital state (via X-Road)

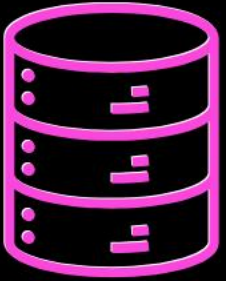
Citizens have:

- Digital ID
- Access to their own data
- Visibility of who accessed their data

Public services:

- Tax, health, voting, business — all connected

Why this matters for AI



AI systems sit on top of **clean, connected, governed data.**

Every data interaction is:

- Logged
- Traceable
- Auditable

Which means:

Explainability is built into the system — not bolted on after.

INTERGENERATIONAL CHALLENGE

Younger workers expect:	— Meaning	— Agency
	— Speed	— Transparency
Public service offers:	— Stability	— Structure
	— Process	

Tension:

→ They want to shape systems.
Not just operate them.

AI Changes This Equation

Opportunities:

- More interesting work (if designed well)
- Less admin, more judgment
- New roles (AI oversight, ethics, systems thinking)

But only if leaders allow it.

PUBLIC SERVICE CONSTRAINTS

- Budget constraints
- Political oversight
- Legacy systems
- Risk aversion
- FOI and audit pressure

“But Constraint Is Also Power”

Because you:

- ➔ See real-world impact before policymakers do
- ➔ Hold trust locally
- ➔ Understand unintended consequences early

You are where policy meets consequence.

INFLUENCING UPWARDS

Dr. Lollie Mancey 

1. Evidence from Practice

- Real examples
- Real failures
- Real citizen impact

2. Coalition Building

- Cross-county / cross-border collaboration
- Shared voice ➤ individual voice

3. Framing the Risk

Government listens to: ➤ Risk ➤ Reputation ➤ Cost

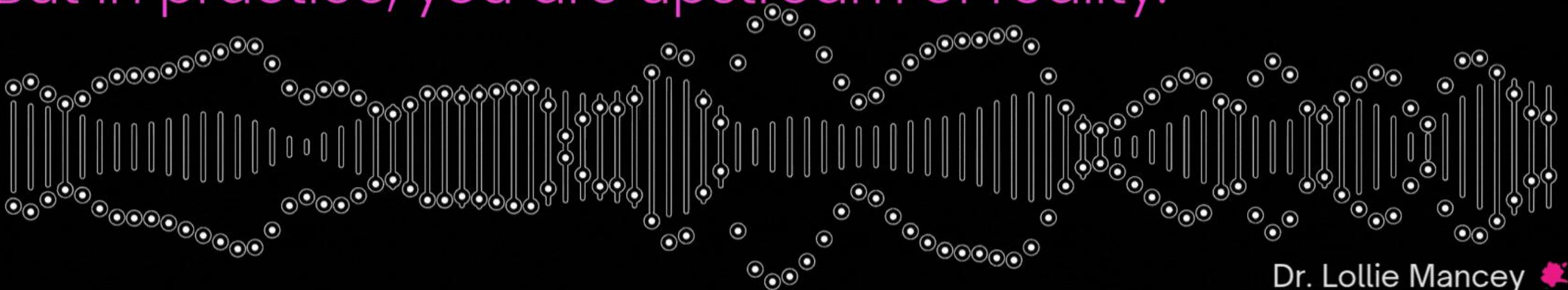
So ——— **Translate community issues into those terms.**

Your Voice in the System

You influence through:

- Procurement decisions
- Pilot programmes
- Data governance choices
- What gets escalated to central government

You may feel downstream of policy.
But in practice, you are upstream of reality.



Thank you!

Let's continue this conversation!

www.drlollie.ie

