

IMPLEMENTING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: BETWEEN NATIONAL STRATEGY AND LOCAL CHALLENGES

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Implementing artificial intelligence requires institutional capacity, yet mismatches across public-sector tiers are often neglected. The central government typically has stronger capacity, centralised information systems, larger budgets, and direct access to national digital strategies, which increases AI readiness. In contrast, local government is fragmented and resource-constrained; AI readiness is reduced by non-interoperable systems, shortages of experts, and dependence on external vendors. National strategies often lack concrete municipal support mechanisms (shared platforms, targeted funding, training), leaving smaller municipalities reactive. This paper reviews and examines stakeholder inclusion in AI implementation and identifies key adoption factors. The analysis assumes both national and local digital strategies that specify rationales (service quality, process optimisation, transparency), employee training on ethics and digital skills, funding models, mechanisms to enhance municipal agility, and active involvement of citizens, experts, and other stakeholders. An exploratory case study was conducted using document analysis and focus groups, with interaction intensity assessed across the collaborative process.

DOI
<https://doi.org/10.18690/um.fov.3.2026.12>

ISBN
978-961-299-124-1

Keywords:
artificial intelligence,
AI implementation, national
strategy,
public sector,
local municipalities



University of Maribor Press

1 Introduction

AI is increasingly positioned as a tool for improving public services and internal efficiency, yet implementation capacity differs substantially across parts of the public sector (van Noordt & Misuraca, 2022; Wirtz et al., 2019). Central administrations typically have stronger institutional capacity, more centralised information systems, larger budgets, and closer access to national digital strategies. At the same time, municipalities often operate with fragmented systems, tighter resources, and limited specialist expertise, which can leave local implementation reactive and uneven (Mergel et al., 2019; Wirtz et al., 2019).

Prior research on public-sector AI highlights a persistent strategy to implementation gap, where high-level commitments are not matched by local enabling conditions such as interoperable systems, specialised expertise, training, and predictable financing. In Slovenia, this gap is visible in the contrast between centralised national ambitions and the operational realities of municipalities, particularly smaller ones that depend more heavily on external vendors and ad hoc solutions. These dynamics raise a governance question: how do stakeholder inclusion and collaboration shape AI implementation trajectories, and which mechanisms are required to move from isolated experimentation toward accountable, routinised adoption? Therefore, this paper examines stakeholder inclusion in municipal AI implementation and identifies key adoption factors that condition progress throughout the collaborative process, capturing how coordination patterns, capacity constraints, and support mechanisms affect implementation at the local level.

1.1 National and Local Digital Strategies for AI Implementation

The digital transformation of Slovenia's public sector is currently guided by an ambitious dual-track approach that seeks to reconcile high-level national strategic objectives with the practical, often constrained, realities of local governance (Ministry of Digital Transformation [MDT], 2025; Aristovnik et al., 2025). While the National Program for Artificial Intelligence 2030 (NpUI 2030) outlines a vision for Slovenia to become an active co-shaper of the global AI landscape, local municipalities face significant hurdles in moving from ad hoc tool use to systemic integration (MDT, 2025; Aristovnik et al., 2025).

The core of Slovenia's digital strategy is the NpUI 2030, which serves as an upgrade to the 2025 framework and focuses on technological, data, and linguistic sovereignty (MDT, 2025). This strategy is designed to ensure that Slovenia is not merely a consumer of global AI commercial products, but a developer of solutions tailored to its own cultural and legal context. A central pillar of this sovereignty is the GaMS model, a large language model specifically trained on Slovenian language corpora to preserve national identity in the digital era (MDT, 2025).

The national strategy is anchored by ten leading principles, including responsibility, safety, and public interest, which aim to foster public trust in digital services (MDT, 2025). Administratively, the strategy introduces a centralised governance model led by the Ministry of Digital Transformation, supported by a Permanent AI Forum and an AI Observatory to monitor progress through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These bodies are tasked with ensuring that 80% of key public services are executed digitally by 2030, a goal harmonised with the Digital Slovenia 2030 (DSI 2030) framework (MDT, 2023).

Despite the clear national roadmap, the existing empirical evidence suggests a significant implementation gap at the local level. Research among municipal employees reveals that although individual motivation is high, organisational readiness remains low. Slovenian municipalities, which are predominantly small to medium-sized organisations, often lack the financial resources and technical infrastructure found in larger state institutions (Aristovnik et al., 2025).

Financial constraints are cited by 55% of organisations as a primary barrier to AI adoption, alongside a lack of access to high-quality, interoperable data (Digital Innovation Hub Slovenia [DIH], 2025). At the local level, this is compounded by bureaucratic rigidity and the absence of clear internal guidelines for recording AI use, raising concerns about the transparency and accountability of administrative procedures (Aristovnik et al., 2025).

To address these challenges, the NpUI 2030 introduces six horizontal building blocks (HG) designed to provide the necessary support structures for both national and local entities (MDT, 2025).

The six horizontal building blocks are:

- Technological Sovereignty: Developing national capacities to reduce dependence on foreign commercial providers and strengthening national AI know-how.
- Infrastructural Support: Building the necessary computing (HPC) and data infrastructure to support AI development.
- Data Availability: Ensuring access to high-quality data for training and implementing AI models.
- Regulatory Framework: Establishing legal rules, ethical standards, and regulatory sandboxes for safe and trustworthy AI.
- Language Technologies: Protecting and developing the Slovenian language in the context of digital and AI tools.
- Human Resources, Skills, and Talent: Enhancing competencies, fostering education, and developing talent to support AI.

Table 1: Comparison of National Strategic Goals vs. Local Operational Realities

Strategic Dimension	Strategic Dimension	Local Municipal Reality
Governance	Centralised leadership via MDT and Inter-ministerial Group.	Fragmented; lack of designated AI officers or formal local guidelines (Aristovnik et al., 2025).
Technology Use	Systemic "mainstreaming" of predictive and autonomous AI.	Isolated use; 92% dominance of generative tools for basic text tasks (Aristovnik et al., 2025).
Skills & Training	Systematic training of 500+ servants/year; AI literacy for all.	High competence gap; 41% of staff report zero access to AI training (Aristovnik et al., 2025).
Infrastructure	Access to sovereign HPC (SLAIF) and national cloud.	Predominant use of public clouds; only 6% currently use HPC (DIH, 2025).
Transparency	Mandatory labelling of AI content; FRIA assessments.	Low visibility; only 22% of municipalities clearly label AI content (Aristovnik et al., 2025).
Data Access	Creation of sectoral data spaces (Health, Gov, etc.).	62% of organisations lack access to adequate data for AI development (DIH, 2025).

Source: Author's own work

1.2 Research Objectives

The paper investigates how municipalities organise AI implementation as a collaborative process and which conditions shape progress from intention and early experimentation toward more structured adoption. The analysis is anchored in stakeholder inclusion and interaction dynamics, and it considers how strategic and support arrangements affect municipal implementation capacity.

Study has three main objectives. First, it targets at identifying the key stakeholder groups involved in municipal AI implementation and specify their roles across the implementation process. Second, it focuses at assessing the intensity of stakeholder interactions and coordination patterns, to determine where these patterns enable or constrain implementation. Third, it tries to isolate the main adoption factors in municipalities, including organisational capacity constraints and the adequacy of enabling mechanisms (for example, shared platforms, financing, and training support).

Following, our study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. Which stakeholders are involved in municipal AI implementation, and how are their roles and responsibilities configured across the process?
- RQ2. How do interaction intensity and coordination patterns among stakeholders influence municipal AI implementation trajectories?
- RQ3. Which factors most strongly shape municipal AI adoption, and how adequate are the enabling mechanisms available to support municipalities?

2 Methodology

This study employs focus groups, a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic defined by the researcher (Morgan, 1996). The method is suitable for examining how shared meanings and organisational cultures shape managers' attitudes and behaviours toward municipal AI implementation and stakeholder inclusion (Rabiee, 2004). Participants were selected via purposive sampling to ensure comparable role-related characteristics and direct familiarity with the municipal context, supporting open discussion within a relatively homogeneous setting (Wilkinson, 1998). Each session was moderated and supported by note-

taking to capture non-verbal dynamics and the “group effect” (Morgan, 1996). Data were analysed through thematic coding and synthesised into theme-based summaries with illustrative statements; salient terms were additionally visualised using a word-frequency word cloud.

As this is still and ongoing study, the empirical setting consists of a single exploratory case in one large municipality in Slovenia with top- and middle-level municipal managers, selected because they combine strategic oversight with operational responsibility. This positioning makes them well placed to address the study’s objectives and RQ1–RQ3 concerning stakeholder roles, coordination and interaction intensity, and key adoption factors and enabling mechanisms.

In line with the exploratory case study design, focus group findings were complemented with document analysis to reconstruct the formal implementation context and triangulate reported practices with strategic and governance arrangements (Yin, 2018; Bowen, 2009). The document set included national and municipal digitalisation strategies, policy guidance, and relevant internal or public reports (Bowen, 2009). Interaction intensity in the collaborative process of municipal AI implementation was assessed across actors by examining interaction frequency, coordination depth, and the degree of institutionalisation through routines and formal roles (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

The focus group sample comprised 30 participants from one large municipality in Slovenia, participating in two focus groups conducted in January 2026. Participation was voluntary.

The participant profile was as follows:

- 10 were male and 20 females.
- Age was primarily 40–49 (13 participants), followed by 30–39 (9) and 50–59 (6), with 2 participants under 30 and none over 60.
- Educational attainment was predominantly tertiary: 14 participants held a university degree, and 13 held a master’s degree/specialisation, while 3 reported post-secondary non-tertiary education.

- In terms of professional background, overall work experience was concentrated in the mid to high ranges: 2 participants had less than 5 years of experience, 5 had 5–10 years, 13 had 11–20 years, 7 had 21–30 years, and 1 had more than 30 years (2 missing responses).
- Time in the current position was most commonly within five years (13 participants), with 5 reporting less than one year, 3 reporting 6–10 years, 7 reporting 11–20 years, and 1 reporting more than 20 years (1 missing response).
- Organisational tenure was reported as less than 1 year (4), 1–5 years (9), 6–10 years (5), 11–20 years (10), and more than 20 years (2).
- Most participants held a managerial role (19), while 9 did not (2 missing responses).
- Self-assessed ICT competence was uniformly average or above: 12 participants reported average skills, 13 good, and 5 very good.
- Participants most frequently reported working in spatial planning/environment/utilities (10), general affairs / HR / legal (8), finance/budget/procurement (7), economy/development / EU projects (5), and social affairs (culture, education, social services) (1). Six participants selected other units, including the mayor's office/city council, protocol and international cooperation, traffic control, and inspectorate/municipal warden services.

3 Results

First, participants described the primary purpose of current AI-related activity in operational terms, emphasising faster case handling, process optimisation, and reduced routine manual work. AI was also reported as supporting drafting and analytical tasks (for example, preparing materials and synthesising information). In addition, transparency and accessibility were mentioned as relevant public value aims associated with AI-enabled improvements.

Second, accounts regarding formalisation and organisational direction varied. Some participants reported that strategic framing is under development at the municipal level, while others indicated limited visibility of formal guidance in their everyday work. Several statements described current AI use as predominantly unit-level or individually driven, rather than coordinated through an organisation-wide approach.

Third, participants reported uneven support for capability. Skills development was most often described as self-directed, including learning by doing and participation in external seminars, with mixed perceptions of internal support. Some participants reported not being aware of any organised training. Ethics, data protection, and regulatory considerations were repeatedly cited as relevant areas, with responses indicating that their operationalisation is not uniform across organisational units.

Table 2: Themes, primary findings, and illustrative statements

Theme	Main findings	Illustrative statements
Aims of AI-related activity	Reported aims focused on speed, process optimisation, workload relief, and support for drafting/analysis; transparency and accessibility were also mentioned.	“Increase productivity/efficiency.” “Faster handling of cases.” “Support in preparing materials and analysing data.”
Formalisation and direction	Reports differed on whether guidance exists; several indicated limited visibility and reliance on individual initiative.	“With limited resources and gradually.” “Financial resources are limited, so free tools are used.” “I think there is one licence available.”
Capability support	Skill development was reported as mostly self-directed; some reported no organised training; internal support varied.	“At the individual level.” “I am not aware that we have training.” “Seminars and trainings on one’s own initiative.”
Resourcing and procurement	Resources were reported as limited; the rollout was described as gradual; reliance on free tools or existing subscriptions, and limited licences, was noted.	“With limited resources and gradually.” “Financial resources are limited, so free tools are used.” “I think there is one licence available.”
Stakeholder involvement	Involvement was reported as primarily internal; external actors were included selectively (experts/vendors) and, less consistently, citizens/state.	Employees are strongly involved.” “Employees and external experts.” “Partly also citizens and the state.”

Source: Author's own work

Fourth, resourcing and procurement were reported as constraints to implementation. Participants referred to gradual roll-out, limited budgets, the use of free tools or AI features embedded in existing subscriptions, and limited licence availability. These responses were typically framed as shaping the pace and scope of AI-related initiatives.

Fifth, participants reported that stakeholder involvement is concentrated primarily within the municipality. Employees, managers, and internal support functions (notably IT and legal) were most consistently referenced. External actors were described as involved more selectively, most commonly external experts and vendors, and less consistently citizens and the state, with involvement varying by topic and implementation phase.

Table 2 summarises the themes, the corresponding main findings, and illustrative participant statements. The distribution of key terms across the response corpus is visualised in Figure 1, which highlights the prominence of concepts related to organisational actors, capability development, and process-oriented implementation aims.



Figure 1: Word cloud of key terms in focus group responses

Source: Author's own work

As shown in Figure 1, the most salient terms relate to organisational stakeholders (e.g., employees), capacity-building instruments (e.g., training), cross-level enabling actors (e.g., the state), and operational implementation domains (e.g., processes and services), which is consistent with the thematic patterning summarised in Table 3.

4 Discussion and implications

The findings indicate an implementation pathway in which early, practice-driven AI use is progressing alongside limited institutionalisation of governance, training, and coordination. This pattern clarifies the paper's central contribution: municipal AI adoption is not explained by "readiness" in a narrow technical sense, but by the interplay between stakeholder configuration (who participates and with what responsibilities), interaction intensity (how collaboration is organised and sustained), and enabling conditions (what supports or constrains the move from experimentation to routinised use). The results provide an empirical basis for specifying "adequate enabling mechanisms" for municipalities as those that reduce person-dependence, routinise responsible use, strengthen procurement and oversight capacity, and improve interoperability and shared infrastructure (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Hickok, 2024; van Noordt & Misuraca, 2022).

Theoretically, the study advances a process-oriented view of municipal AI adoption that integrates collaborative governance logics with public-sector AI implementation scholarship. By treating implementation as a multi-actor coordination problem rather than a single-organisation technology decision, this approach shows how interaction intensity and the institutionalisation of coordination routines can be conceptualised as mechanisms that translate strategic intent into implementation trajectories (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). In doing so, the paper adds granularity to established accounts of AI diffusion in government by identifying how coordination structures shape whether municipalities remain in fragmented experimentation or progress toward accountable, repeatable practices (van Noordt & Misuraca, 2022).

Practically, the results imply that municipalities should treat AI implementation as an interdisciplinary organisational change effort with explicit ownership, defined roles across internal functions (service units, IT, legal, HR, procurement), and routinised procedures for permissible use, documentation, and accountability. At the same time, the findings underscore that national-level support must be operationally usable at the municipal level. Shared platforms, structured competence development (including ethics and compliance), and predictable financing mechanisms can reduce fragmentation and mitigate vendor-dependence, while interoperability support and

common standards address a key barrier to scaling AI beyond narrow use cases (European Commission, 2024b; Hickok, 2024).

The findings suggest that municipal AI implementation in this case is advancing through a predominantly operational logic, where perceived benefits are tied to incremental process improvements and individual or unit-level use. This pattern is consistent with broader evidence that public-sector AI uptake often begins with low-risk, productivity-oriented applications. It only later shifts toward more formalised organisational adoption once governance, capacity, and integration requirements become salient (van Noordt & Misuraca, 2022). From an implementation perspective, this sequencing matters because early uptake can create a sense of progress while leaving institutional foundations underdeveloped, thereby increasing variation across units and limiting the municipality's ability to scale beyond informal or discretionary use.

The resourcing pattern reported by participants is also consistent with the broader finding that public organisations often face limited discretionary budgets for AI, uncertainty about how to measure value creation, and difficulties embedding AI investment into standard planning cycles, which collectively reinforce gradual roll-out and uneven diffusion. In municipal contexts, these constraints can further intensify reliance on existing subscriptions, free tools, and vendor-led options, which heightens the importance of procurement capacity and contract governance. The public procurement literature warns that AI procurement can amplify information asymmetries and shift control toward suppliers unless municipalities have sufficient capability to specify requirements, manage risk, and maintain accountability (Hickok, 2024).

Finally, the reported pattern of stakeholder involvement, which is strong internally and selective externally, has implications for the adequacy of enabling mechanisms available to municipalities. If municipal AI adoption is shaped by uneven capability development and limited resourcing, then support mechanisms need to be evaluated for their operational usability at the local level, not just for their formal availability.

To sum up, the study suggests that municipal AI adoption is best understood as a coordination and capacity-building challenge embedded in multi-level governance, rather than merely a technological upgrade. Strengthening interaction intensity

through institutionalised collaboration, alongside targeted enabling mechanisms that address skills, procurement oversight, and interoperability, appears central to moving municipalities from fragmented experimentation toward accountable implementation and sustainable public value creation (Ansell & Gash, 2008; van Noordt & Misuraca, 2022).

5 Concluding reflections

Paper addresses three main research questions. For RQ1, the stakeholder configuration reported by participants places internal actors at the centre of implementation, with employees, managers, and internal support functions (notably IT and legal) described as the most consistently involved groups. This is consistent with public administration accounts of AI implementation as a compliance-intensive, socio-technical change process in which operational units, legal assurance, and technical support jointly determine what can be adopted and under which constraints (Mergel et al., 2024; Straub et al., 2023). The more selective role of external actors, especially vendors and external experts, also reflects a typical capacity pattern in which municipalities draw on market and expert support when internal capability is limited, which can influence the distribution of decision rights and practical control during implementation (Hickok, 2024).

For RQ2, the reported variation in strategic visibility and the prominence of unit-level or individual initiative can be interpreted as a coordination structure with uneven interaction intensity across organisational segments. Collaborative governance scholarship emphasises that implementation trajectories depend not only on actor presence but on how interaction is organised and institutionalised through routines, shared procedures, and stabilised roles (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Where coordination is not routinised, collaboration becomes episodic and person-dependent, increasing fragmentation and creating discontinuities in implementation between experimentation, formalisation, and scaling. This aligns with more recent evidence that AI changes bureaucratic work in ways that are contingent on organisational context and coordination arrangements, producing divergent outcomes across units within the same administration (Giest & Klievink, 2024).

For RQ3, the findings point toward a bundle of adoption conditions that jointly shape municipal trajectories: capability development, responsible-use operationalisation, and resource constraints. The prevalence of self-directed learning and uneven training provision closely aligns with system-level assessments that identify skills gaps and limited structured guidance as persistent constraints, especially when organisations attempt to move from ad hoc use to repeatable, accountable processes. Importantly, participants' emphasis on ethics, data protection, and regulatory considerations indicates that "readiness" is not reducible to tool access; it requires role-specific procedures for permissible use cases, documentation standards, escalation routes, and accountability allocation, which the public-sector literature treats as central to legitimacy and risk management in AI-enabled work (Mergel et al., 2024; Straub et al., 2023).

Several limitations of the paper should be considered. First, the study is still ongoing and is thus based on an exploratory single-case design in one large municipality, which limits statistical generalisability and may under-represent constraints faced by smaller municipalities with lower capacity, although it helps getting an insight into theory-building perspective. Second, the evidence is derived from focus group accounts and short written responses, which reflect perceptions at a particular time point and do not directly measure actual AI use, performance outcomes, or longitudinal changes in governance routines. Third, the participant group consisted of top and middle management; perspectives from frontline employees, IT specialists, legal officers, vendors, and citizens were not systematically captured, although these actors were discussed as relevant stakeholders. Following, these limitations will be addressed in the further stages of research through comparative, longitudinal, and multi-actor research designs.

Acknowledgment

This conference paper is a part of the internal research project titled "The Impact of Demographic Change and Artificial Intelligence on the Public Sector Labour Market", supported by the internal call for research and development funding at the Faculty of Public Administration, University of Ljubljana.

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