

Application of Design Thinking Methodology in the Management of Territorial Communities

Ivan Lopushynskiy ^{1*} • Viktor Petrenko ² • Mariia Krasii ³

¹ Ivano-Frankivsk National Technical University of Oil and Gas (Ukraine). Head of the Department of Public Management, Administration and National Security, Doctor of Sciences in Public Administration, Professor, Honored Worker of Education of Ukraine.

² Ivano-Frankivsk National Technical University of Oil and Gas (Ukraine). Professor at the Department of Public Management, Administration and National Security, Doctor of Sciences in Economics, Professor.

³ Ivano-Frankivsk National Technical University of Oil and Gas (Ukraine). Associate Professor of the Department of Public Management, Administration and National Security, Candidate of Sciences in Law, Associate Professor.

* Corresponding Author, e-mail: doctordumetaua@meta.ua

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the study of the application of design thinking methodology in the management of territorial communities of Ukraine in the conditions of decentralization, martial law and limited resources. It is substantiated that the reform of the local government system and the strengthening of the responsibility of communities for strategic development, the provision of public services and change management require the use of methodologies that can combine orientation to the needs of the population, flexibility of management decisions and legal certainty. The evolution of design thinking from design and innovation practice to the management methodology of the public sector is revealed, the connection with the concepts of good governance, public value, participatory management and change management is shown. The theoretical and methodological principles of design thinking, the structure of the stages (needs research, problem formulation, generation of alternatives, prototyping, verification and adjustment of solutions) and the principles of human-centeredness, iterativity, interdisciplinarity and experimentalism are outlined. The features of the implementation of the specified methodology in the management of territorial communities are analyzed, taking into account the Ukrainian regulatory field, institutional support programs, strategic planning practices and the development of public services. It is shown that the use of design thinking contributes to the transformation of management models in the direction of project-oriented governance, increasing the involvement of residents, expanding the use of pilot solutions and feedback mechanisms. At the same time, problems of fragmented implementation, insufficient integration into everyday management procedures, limited human resources potential and the lack of direct regulatory consolidation of the methodology are identified. A conclusion is formulated on the feasibility of developing design thinking as a tool for innovative local development, and prospects for further research are outlined, related to the analysis of institutional mechanisms for integrating design thinking into the public administration system, empirical assessment of the practices of individual communities and substantiation of the possibilities of regulatory and organizational consolidation of the relevant methodology in Ukraine.

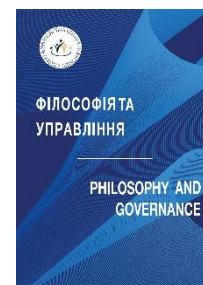
KEYWORDS

design thinking, management methodology, management of territorial communities, public administration, innovative development, local self-government, change management, territorial community, decentralization, state, society, marital law, public servant.



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Застосування методології дизайн-мислення в управлінні територіальними громадами

Іван П. Лопушинський ^{1*} • Віктор П. Петренко ² • Марія О. Красій ³

¹ Івано-Франківський національний технічний університет нафти і газу (Україна). Завідувач кафедри публічного управління, адміністрування і національної безпеки, д-р наук з держ. упр., професор, заслужений працівник освіти України.

² Івано-Франківський національний технічний університет нафти і газу (Україна). Професор кафедри публічного управління, адміністрування і національної безпеки, д-р екон. наук, професор.

³ Івано-Франківський національний технічний університет нафти і газу (Україна). Доцент кафедри публічного управління, адміністрування і національної безпеки, канд. юрид. наук, доцент.

* Автор-кореспондент, e-mail: doctordumetaua@meta.ua

СТАТТЯ	АНОТАЦІЯ
Дослідницька DOI: 10.70651/3041-248X/2025.12.08 Отримана: 30.10.2025 р. Прийнята: 03.12.2025 р. Опублікована: 16.12.2025 р. Авторське право © 2025 авторів Цей твір ліцензовано на умовах Ліцензії Creative Commons «Із Зазначенням Авторства – Некомерційна 4.0 Міжнародна» (CC BY-NC 4.0).	Статтю присвячено дослідженню застосування методології дизайн-мислення в управлінні територіальними громадами України в умовах децентралізації, воєнного стану та обмеженості ресурсів. Обґрунтовано, що реформування системи місцевого самоврядування й посилення відповідальності громад за стратегічний розвиток, надання публічних послуг і управління змінами вимагають використання методологій, здатних поєднати орієнтацію на потреби населення, гнучкість управлінських рішень і правову визначеність. Розкрито еволюцію дизайн-мислення від дизайнерської та інноваційної практики до управлінської методології публічного сектору, показано зв'язок з концепціями належного врядування, публічної цінності, партисипативного управління й управління змінами. Окреслено теоретико-методологічні засади дизайн-мислення, структуру етапів (дослідження потреб, формулювання проблеми, генерація альтернатив, прототипування, перевірка й коригування рішень) та принципи людиноцентричності, ітеративності, міждисциплінарності й експериментальності. Проаналізовано особливості імплементації зазначеної методології в управлінні територіальними громадами з урахуванням українського нормативного поля, програм інституційної підтримки, практик стратегічного планування та розвитку публічних послуг. Показано, що застосування дизайн-мислення сприяє трансформації управлінських моделей у напрямі проєктно-орієнтованого врядування, підвищенню залученості мешканців, розширенню використання пілотних рішень та механізмів зворотного зв'язку. Водночас виявлено проблеми фрагментарності впровадження, недостатньої інтегрованості в повсякденні управлінські процедури, обмеженості кадрового потенціалу й відсутності прямого нормативного закріплення методології. Сформульовано висновок про доцільність розвитку дизайн-мислення як інструменту інноваційного місцевого розвитку, а також окреслено перспективи подальших досліджень, пов'язані з аналізом інституційних механізмів інтеграції дизайн-мислення у систему публічного управління, емпіричною оцінкою практик окремих громад та обґрунтуванням можливостей нормативного й організаційного закріплення відповідної методології в Україні.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

дизайн-мислення, методологія управління, управління територіальними громадами, публічне управління, інноваційний розвиток, місцеве самоврядування, управління змінами, територіальна громада, децентралізація, держава, суспільство, воєнний стан, публічна служба.

1. Introduction

The current stage of development of public administration is characterized by a rethinking of the role of local self-government bodies as key actors of local development and social changes. Within the European management tradition, local governance is increasingly seen not only as an institutional mechanism for exercising powers, but as a space for interaction between the authorities, the community and other stakeholders, in which decisions focused on long-term public value are formed. Such a transformation leads to a change in managerial paradigms – from hierarchical and procedurally oriented models to flexible, adaptive and human-centered approaches.

In this context, the search for methodologies that can provide a qualitatively new level of understanding of managerial problems and the development of solutions in conditions of complexity, uncertainty and multiplicity of interests is of particular importance. One of these methodologies is design thinking, which is increasingly used in the field of public administration, local governance and the development of public services in world practice. Its conceptual value lies in the combination of analytical and creative thinking, focusing on the needs of public service users and using iterative decision-making logic.

2. Literature Review

In modern scientific discourse, design thinking is considered an innovative methodology for solving complex managerial problems, which is becoming widespread in the field of public administration and local self-government. The theoretical foundations of design thinking were formulated by T. Brown [1], who defines it as a process of combining people's needs, organizational capabilities and social context in order to create innovative solutions. The author emphasizes the universal nature of this approach and its suitability for working with weakly structured problems.

Domestic research focuses on the adaptation of design thinking to management and public practices. N. Zakharchenko [14] substantiates the expediency of using design thinking as a tool for managerial decision-making in conditions of uncertainty, emphasizing its human-centered and iterative logic. I. Vishka [13] considers design thinking as a methodology for forming managerial decisions in public administration, which combines an empathic understanding of the needs of citizens, creative search and experimental verification of results.

The institutional dimension of the application of design thinking in the public sector is presented in the works of D. Dzvinchuk et al. [3], who substantiate the feasibility of creating design thinking laboratories as a mechanism for generating and testing innovative management decisions. Foreign empirical studies confirm that the integration of design practices into the activities of local authorities depends on the institutional context and organizational support [5].

The practical aspects of implementing design thinking in the activities of territorial communities are reflected in analytical reviews of the public sector in Great Britain [6] and in Ukrainian community development initiatives, in particular within the framework of the "Hromada 4.0" program [4]. The normative principles for the use of human-centered and participatory approaches in the activities of local self-government bodies are determined by the provisions of the Law of Ukraine "On Local Self-Government in Ukraine" [10] and related acts of public law.

Thus, the analysis of scientific sources shows that design thinking has significant potential for modernizing the management of territorial communities. At the same time, the scientific literature does not sufficiently investigate the issues of its systematic integration into the everyday management processes of local self-government bodies, which determines the relevance of further scientific research in this direction.

3. Problem Statement

The reform of the local self-government system and the implementation of decentralization policy in Ukraine have actualized the issue of increasing the capacity of territorial communities for independent strategic development, effective resource management and the provision of quality public services. Martial law, demographic changes, growing social vulnerability of the population and limited financial and human resources significantly complicate the management activities of local self-government bodies. Under such circumstances, traditional administrative and bureaucratic

management models, focused mainly on regulatory procedures and formal exercise of powers, do not provide the appropriate level of adaptability and effectiveness of managerial decisions.

In the context of the development of public administration in the European administrative space, the importance of human-centered, participatory and intersectoral approaches to managerial decision-making is growing. Local governments are increasingly expected not only to exercise delegated powers, but also to be able to manage change, shape local innovations and design solutions in cooperation with citizens, business and civil society. However, at the level of territorial communities, there is no established methodological base that would combine orientation to the needs of the population, flexibility of management and practical implementation of management decisions.

Under these conditions, the need for the introduction of modern management methodologies capable of providing a systematic solution to complex problems of local development is actualized. The design thinking methodology, based on an in-depth analysis of the needs of public service users, iterative search for solutions and experimentation, is considered in world practice as an effective tool for transforming public administration. At the same time, in the domestic system of management of territorial communities, the use of design thinking remains fragmented and insufficiently theoretically grounded.

4. Methods and Materials

The methodological basis of the study is a combination of general scientific and special methods of cognition, which provides a comprehensive analysis of the possibilities of applying design thinking in the management of territorial communities. The study is based on an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the provisions of the theory of public administration, local self-government, innovation management and design research.

In the process of research, analysis and synthesis were used, which made it possible to generalize scientific approaches to understanding design thinking as a management methodology and determine its place in the system of modern public administration tools. Inductive and deductive methods were used to form generalized conclusions about the possibilities and limitations of using design thinking at the level of territorial communities.

The comparative method is used to compare traditional administrative and procedural management models with human-oriented and iterative approaches that underlie design thinking, as well as to analyze foreign and domestic practices of its application in the public sector. The systematic approach made it possible to consider the management of territorial communities as a complex open system, within which design thinking acts as a tool for managing changes and increasing the adaptability of managerial decisions.

Within the framework of the study, a structural and functional method was used, with the help of which the stages of the design thinking methodology (empathy, problem formulation, idea generation, prototyping, testing) and the possibilities of their integration into the practical activities of local self-government bodies, taking into account the current regulatory and legal field, were analyzed.

To form generalized conclusions, the method of scientific generalization was used, which provided systematization of the results of the analysis and determination of prospects for the further use of design thinking in the management of territorial communities. The use of these methods in the aggregate made it possible to ensure the validity of the results obtained and the compliance of the study with the set goal.

5. Results and Discussion

In scientific discourse, design thinking is formed as an interdisciplinary methodology that emerged at the intersection of design theory, innovation management and cognitive sciences. The initial stages of formation are associated with the rethinking of design activity as an intellectual process of solving problems, and not exclusively the creation of material objects. Subsequently, design thinking began to be considered as a universal way of working with complex, poorly structured problems characterized by a multiplicity of factors and uncertainty of results. A generalization of the evolution of the concept and its connection with the innovative development of organizations is presented in a fundamental article by T. Brown [1], where design thinking is interpreted as a process of combining people's needs, organizational capabilities and social context.

Further development of design thinking took place through the institutionalization of human-centered design, which contributed to the transfer of this methodology to the sphere of social and public practices. According to N. Zakharchenko [14], the modern business environment is characterized by an increase in volatility and unpredictability, which leads to the expansion of competition beyond products, services and technologies and covers sales channels, management decisions, personnel and brand. Under such conditions, the ability of organizations to systematically generate and implement new ideas becomes crucial, which requires the involvement of the creative potential of the entire team. The author substantiates design thinking as an effective tool for solving managerial and business problems, based on empathy, a deep understanding of the needs of customers and users, as well as on human-centered, variable and iterative decision-making logic, which reduces the risks of wasting resources and time and forms balanced management decisions in conditions of high uncertainty. Ukrainian research also records the process of adapting design thinking to the needs of public administration. In the scientific article by I. Vishka [13], design thinking is defined as a methodology for the formation of managerial decisions, which combines empathic understanding of problems, creative search and experimental verification of results in the public sector.

The methodological specificity of design thinking is revealed through a set of principles that determine its difference from classical management models. The conceptual basis of the approach is formed by the principles of empathic orientation to human needs, process iterativity, interdisciplinary team interaction and experimentation through rapid prototyping. The methodological value of design thinking lies in prioritizing hypothesis testing over finding “perfect” solutions, tolerance for errors, and learning through feedback. The application of these principles within the successive stages of empathy, focus, idea generation, prototyping and testing ensures an increase in the validity of management and project decisions in the public and private sectors [8].

The open segment of the research demonstrates the reorientation of design thinking from the business context to the field of public service and local development, including institutional models for the dissemination of competencies. D. Dzvinchuk et al. [3] substantiate the expediency of using design thinking to intensify the generation of non-standard management decisions in the public administration system, and also describe the organizational mechanism of the design thinking laboratory as an environment for researching, testing and replicating innovative products, processes and services for users of public services. This formulation allows us to consider design thinking not as a separate set of exercises, but as an element of management infrastructure capable of supporting change management at the level of territorial communities.

Foreign empirical research complements the theoretical framework with the organizational dimension of the implementation of design practices in local governance. The article by A. Kim et al. [5] show that the long-term integration of design practices in local government organizations is associated with the acquisition of legitimacy (pragmatic, moral, cognitive) and with the formation of internal processes and support structures, and the trajectory of stabilization depends on the context and needs of a particular organization. Analytical reviews of the UK public sector also record the use of design for policy-making and improving service delivery at the central and local levels, which confirms the relevance of design thinking to public administration practices [6].

The normative basis suitable for the institutionalization of design thinking at the local level is provided by the provisions of the Law of Ukraine “On Local Self-Government in Ukraine” [10], which defines the competencies of local self-government bodies in the areas of socio-economic and cultural development, organization of service provision, planning of the development of territories, as well as forms of participation of the population in solving issues of local importance. An additional legal outline is formed by the norms on access to public information and consideration of citizens’ appeals, which set the standard of information openness and procedural responsibility of authorities, which is methodologically compatible with empathic research of needs and verification of managerial decisions through feedback.

Empirical examples of the implementation of design thinking in community management are available in capacity development programs of local self-government bodies, where community teams work according to the design thinking methodology for a certain period to create and test products and services aimed at residents. A publicly documented example is the “Hromada 4.0” initiative, in which communities worked according to the design thinking methodology, developing and testing resident-oriented solutions [4]. At the level of individual communities, workshops and working sessions on design thinking are recorded within the framework of cooperation with local government support programs.

Crisis and transformation processes (related to martial law, migration shifts, and limited financial resources) increase the demand for tools for rapid redesign of services and procedures. The Law of Ukraine “On the Legal Regime of Martial Law” [12] defines the framework conditions for the functioning of public authorities in a special period, and the design thinking methodology at the applied level supports the adaptation of local services through piloting and adjustment of management decisions without losing the controllability of processes.

Considering the stages of the design thinking methodology in the activities of local self-government bodies, it should be noted that in Ukrainian management practice, this logic is implemented not in the form of a separate normatively enshrined procedure, but through a combination of strategic planning tools, development of public services and mechanisms of residents’ participation provided for by the current legislation and programs of institutional support of communities. The initial stage is a study of the needs of residents of the territorial community, which in Ukrainian conditions is carried out through public consultations, surveys, analysis of citizens’ appeals, work with target groups and assessment of the availability of services. The normative basis for such a study is formed by the provisions of the Law of Ukraine “On Local Self-Government in Ukraine”, which enshrine the right of the territorial community to participate in solving issues of local importance, as well as the Law of Ukraine “On Citizens’ Appeals”, which defines the tools for recording and analyzing public requests [9].

The practical implementation of this stage in Ukraine can be traced in the activities of territorial municipalities within the framework of capacity development programmes, in particular the U-LEAD programme with Europe, where municipalities undergo training modules to analyse residents’ needs before developing management decisions and local development projects. The relevant U-LEAD methodological materials directly indicate the need to start the management cycle by identifying the problems and expectations of public service users [2].

The next logical stage is the formulation of the management problem, which in Ukrainian practice is associated with the analytical generalization of the collected data and their transformation into the tasks of local policy or management decision. In the strategic documents of communities, this stage is reflected in the formulation of goals and objectives of strategies for the development of territorial communities, plans for socio-economic development and recovery programs. The methodological recommendations of the Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine [7] on the development of community development strategies directly require substantiating problems based on the analysis of the needs of the population and the local context, which, by its logic, corresponds to the stage of problem formulation in design thinking.

The generation of managerial decisions in the activities of local self-government bodies in Ukraine is implemented through participatory management mechanisms, in particular public hearings, consultations with the public, the work of advisory bodies and citizen participation in project planning. The legislative basis for this stage is created by the provisions on openness and transparency of the activities of the authorities, as well as the practice of involving the public in the formation of decisions at the local level. In community support programs implemented with the participation of international partners, solutions are generated in the format of facilitated sessions, where representatives of local governments, businesses and NGOs jointly develop alternative solutions to specific local problems.

The prototyping stage in Ukrainian communities manifests itself in the form of pilot implementation of new management solutions, services or procedures. This is most clearly seen in the field of administrative services provision through administrative service centers, where experimental service formats, electronic services, new service routes and consulting formats are being introduced. The legal basis for such actions is formed by the Law of Ukraine “On Administrative Services”, which allows for the improvement of procedures for the provision of services and the introduction of innovative service solutions [11].

A separate example of the institutionalization of prototyping is the initiatives of digital transformation of communities, which are implemented under the coordination of the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine. As part of these initiatives, communities are testing digital solutions, e-services, and new models of interaction with residents before their full-scale implementation.

The final stage is the verification and adjustment of managerial decisions, which in Ukrainian practice is carried out through the analysis of citizens’ appeals, assessment of the quality of service provision, and monitoring the implementation of programs and strategic documents. In municipalities, decisions on scaling or revising pilot initiatives are made based on the actual results of their implementation, which corresponds to the logic of a closed management cycle.

Considering the problems of implementing the design thinking methodology in the management of territorial communities, it should be noted that, on the one hand, this methodology demonstrates a high potential for updating management practices, but, on the other hand, its practical application faces a number of institutional, organizational and personnel limitations. Compared to traditional administrative and management models, design thinking implies a greater level of openness, flexibility and participation of residents, but in the real practice of local governments, such approaches do not always find proper organizational and regulatory support.

In this sense, the primary issue is the fragmentation of design thinking application, as it is typically employed in individual projects or pilot initiatives, rather than being systematically integrated into daily management processes. It is worth noting that design thinking is primarily applied in areas such as strategic planning, public service development, or digital transformation, whereas procedural and regulatory approaches currently dominate in administrative management. In the same way, like other innovative tools of public administration, design thinking is often perceived as an auxiliary element, and not as a methodological basis for managerial decision-making.

At the same time, it is impossible not to take into account the personnel aspect of the problem. On the one hand, local governments have practical knowledge of the local context, but on the other hand, officials do not always have adequate competencies in the field of facilitation, working with qualitative data, and project thinking. In this context, the possibility of large-scale implementation of design thinking without systematic staff training and changes in management culture is questionable. It is hardly possible to agree with the statement that the formal use of individual tools is enough to achieve sustainable management results.

In addition, in the context of legal regulation, it should be borne in mind that the current legislation of Ukraine does not directly enshrine design thinking as a management methodology. However, similar to other modern approaches to public administration, it can be implemented through existing legal mechanisms for citizen participation, public consultations, strategic planning and pilot implementation of management decisions. At the same time, as the regulatory framework creates a general framework for participation and openness, it does not regulate the procedures for co-creating management decisions, which leads to different levels of practical implementation of design thinking in communities.

At the same time, the prospects for the application of design thinking in the management of territorial communities are associated with the further development of decentralization, digital transformation and the orientation of public administration to the result. In this aspect, it should be taken into account that design thinking not only contributes to improving the quality of managerial decisions but also forms a new logic of interaction between the authorities and citizens. It is undeniable that involving residents in the processes of identifying problems and finding solutions increases the social legitimacy of local policies and reduces the level of conflict in the community.

In contrast to administrative-command management models, design thinking focuses on the step-by-step clarification of goals and decisions, which is especially important in conditions of uncertainty and crisis challenges. In this context, the experience of municipalities using pilot projects and experimental service delivery formats convincingly proves that managerial flexibility is becoming a key characteristic of a capable community. Moreover, the results of the practical implementation of project solutions confirm the validity of the statement about the feasibility of combining strategic planning with an experimental approach to management.

Thus, the study allows us to conclude that design thinking in the management of territorial communities should be considered not as a universal recipe, but as a tool for change management, the effectiveness of which depends on institutional capacity, management culture and the level of participation of residents. As a result, all this indicates that the further development of design thinking in the local self-government system requires a combination of regulatory support, personnel development and system integration into management processes. Summing up, we can say with confidence that design thinking has significant potential for the formation of adaptive and result-oriented models of management of territorial communities in Ukraine.

6. Conclusions

Thus, the study confirms that the design thinking methodology is an important tool for modernizing the management of territorial communities in the context of decentralization, crisis transformations and growing demand for quality public services, as it contributes to the transition from administrative-procedural to adaptive, human-centered and results-oriented models of local

governance. The application of design thinking provides a deeper understanding of the needs of residents, expands public participation in the formation of management decisions and creates opportunities for their step-by-step verification, while its effectiveness directly depends on the institutional capacity of local governments, professional training of officials and the readiness of the management system for innovation. At the same time, the relevance of design thinking is increasing in the processes of change management, community recovery and transformation of public services, but the fragmentation of implementation, the lack of systemic consolidation and resource constraints necessitate an integrated approach to its further development, combining regulatory support, institutional development and systematic training of managerial personnel.

Prospects for further scientific research are related, firstly, to an in-depth analysis of institutional mechanisms for integrating design thinking into the public administration system at the local level. Secondly, it is advisable to empirically study the practices of applying design thinking in specific territorial communities using quantitative and qualitative research methods. Thirdly, the relevant direction of further research is to assess the impact of design thinking on the quality of public services, the level of participation of residents and socio-economic indicators of community development. Also, the study of the possibilities of normative and organizational consolidation of design thinking as a component of the modern methodology of public administration in Ukraine seems promising.

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