Neuroinclusion as imagination: from 'knowing for' to 'imagining with'

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Abstract

Contemporary approaches to neuroinclusion in education, employment, and public policy remain dominated by technocratic and compliance-oriented logics that treat neurodivergence as a deficit to be managed through diagnosis, accommodation, and legal adjustment. Although such frameworks have advanced formal rights, they often reproduce neuronormative assumptions and position policymakers and professionals as experts 'knowing for' neurodivergent people, rather than designing systems with them. This paper challenges that orientation by reconceptualising neuroinclusion as an imaginative and participatory practice of policymaking. Drawing on critical pragmatism and sociotechnical systems theory, and extending Özbilgin et al.'s HR-led co-design model, it proposes a shift from 'knowing for' to 'imagining with,' where lived experience is recognised as legitimate policy knowledge and neurodivergent individuals act as co-authors of institutional futures.

The paper develops a cyclical process model of neuroinclusion as imagination, which we define as the capacity to see beyond current institutional arrangements, linking policy challenges to co-design interventions and learning-oriented outcomes, reframing policy as an iterative form of democratic inquiry rather than a static artefact. Here, imagination does not denote fantasy or speculation detached from reality. Rather, it refers to the collective capacity to envision and prototype institutional arrangements that do not yet exist but could plausibly emerge through participatory design. In this sense, imagination is a practical, democratic faculty: a method for expanding what institutions consider possible. Through illustrative cases from global governance, national initiatives, higher education, and corporate practice, it demonstrates how participatory design, shared ownership, and reflexive accountability can embed neuroinclusive imagination structurally within institutions. These practices move beyond symbolic consultation to policy co-ownership, supported by infrastructures of recognition, resources, relationships, and continuous learning. By positioning imagination as both an ethical stance and a practical method, the paper contributes a novel framework for designing more adaptive, just, and innovative institutions. Neuroinclusion thus emerges not only as a matter of equity, but as a source of collective learning and democratic renewal, enabling organisations and states to co-create more resilient futures with neurodivergent citizens.

1. Introduction: From 'knowing for' to 'imagining with'

Policy is a powerful form of imagination (Latime & Skeggs, 2011). Imagination denotes a collective and situated capacity to envision and prototype alternative institutional arrangements grounded in lived experience rather than abstract expertise (Sehlikoglu,

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2025). Yet, most public and organisational policies concerning neurodivergent citizens have been crafted not with them, but for them. This 'knowing for' orientation presumes that policymakers, experts, or managers hold objective knowledge about what neurodivergent people need. It reduces neurodivergence to a technical or medical problem to be solved through diagnosis, classification, and adjustment. What it neglects is the imaginative, relational, and lived dimensions of policy, how it might feel, look, and function if designed together with those who inhabit its consequences.

In education, employment, and healthcare systems, neurodivergent individuals, those with cognitive, sensory, and neurological differences such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, or dyspraxia, continue to experience structural disadvantage (Erbil et al., 2025). Despite a rise in awareness, most policy frameworks remain tethered to compliance logics, manifesting as legal checklists, mandatory disclosure forms, standardised reasonable adjustment templates, or one-off awareness training sessions that leave neuronormative assumptions intact. . These approaches fail to address the root causes of exclusion: the design of institutions, technologies, and cultures around neurotypical norms of communication, productivity, and performance.

Building on the model of HR-led co-design for neuroinclusion (Özbilgin et al., 2025a), this paper proposes a different orientation: neuroinclusion as imagination. Rather than treating neuroinclusion as a technical adjustment or compliance goal, it can be understood as a collective act of imagining better institutional futures. Co-design becomes not just a method but a form of democratic imagination, an ethical and epistemological stance that values lived experience as knowledge (Özbilgin, 2024). Drawing on critical pragmatism (Dewey, 1909/2009; Forester, 2013) and sociotechnical systems theory (Emery & Trist, 1973), this paper reframes policy-making as an iterative process of learning with neurodivergent individuals, transforming the power dynamics of who gets to imagine policy in the first place.

The argument unfolds in six parts. First, it interrogates the limits of technocratic and deficit-based policy-making, showing how 'knowing for'curtails imagination. Second, it conceptualises neuroinclusion as imagination, building on HR-led co-design to translate this into a participatory model for public and organisational policy. Third, it offers examples of imaginative policy practices that challenge neuronormative assumptions. Fourth, it outlines the institutional conditions for policy co-ownership, where neurodivergent people share authorship of policy futures (Özbilgin, 2024). The paper closes with a practical roadmap for policy actors, followed by a concise one-page brief that summarises key actions across national, organisational, and educational domains.

Conceptually, imagination has a longer lineage in social theory. Castoriadis (1987) describes the social imaginary as the instituting power through which societies create new norms and forms; Taylor (2004) frames social imaginaries as the shared horizons that make collective action intelligible; and Appadurai (1996) treats imagination as a social practice through which marginalised groups articulate alternative futures. In pragmatist philosophy, Dewey (1934) positions imagination as the faculty that recombines experience into new possibilities for action. These traditions treat imagination not as metaphor but as a practical, collective capacity for institutional transformation. It is this grounded, political sense of imagination that this paper mobilises.

Neuroinclusion as imagination is not a moral project; it is a pragmatic one (Özbilgin et al., 2025a). In complex and uncertain times, when institutions face crises of legitimacy and imagination alike, engaging neurodivergent citizens in the act of policy-making can renew democratic vitality (De Vries, 2024). To imagine together is to recognise together. Through such recognition, inclusion ceases to be a checklist and becomes a practice of co-creating the future. Research consistently highlights strengths associated with neurodivergent cognition, enhanced pattern recognition, sustained attention, divergent problem-solving, and sensory acuity, which are often undervalued in standardised institutional settings (den Houting et al., 2024). Involving neurodivergent individuals in policy design, therefore, expands not only justice but also institutional intelligence.

2. Policy-Making and the Limits of Technocratic Knowledge

This section situates neuroinclusion policy within the longer trajectory of technocratic governance, where inclusion is rendered legible through audit, categorisation, and procedural compliance. It clarifies how the dominance of expert-driven policy rationalities sustains 'knowing for'as a default mode of design, narrowing the range of voices and forms of knowledge that count as policy evidence. It then introduces critical pragmatism and sociotechnical systems theory as complementary resources for rethinking policy as inquiry and design, creating the conceptual bridge to the next section's process model of neuroinclusion as imagination.

2.1 The technocratic impulse

The technocratic did not arise accidentally. It is historically tied to managerialism and neoliberal public administration reforms, which prioritised audit, targets, and measurable outputs as substitutes for relational judgement (Power, 1987; Shore & Wright, 2015). Under these logics, inclusion becomes something to document and certify rather than something to negotiate and redesign. Contemporary policy frameworks addressing neurodivergence, whether global instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) or domestic legislation such as the UK Equality Act (2010) and the US Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) share a technocratic DNA. They tend to define inclusion through compliance: a matter of rights enforcement, diagnostic categorisation, and measurable adjustment. These frameworks have been instrumental in legitimising disability rights, yet they also entrench a narrow form of policy rationality, one that privileges procedural knowledge over experiential understanding.

This technocratic mode of governance is driven by governmentality, the belief that social complexity can be managed through expertise, data, and control (Foucault, 1991). In this regime, neurodivergence is framed as a problem to be diagnosed, accommodated, or normalised, rather than a difference that can inspire new ways of organising and thinking. The result is neuronormativity, the assumption that neurotypical functioning represents the natural, efficient, and rational mode of being (Erbil et al., 2025). Such an assumption travels into policymaking through the language of efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and work readiness, marginalising those whose ways of thinking, sensing, or communicating fall outside the norm.

2.2 The epistemic limits of 'knowing for'

Technocratic policy is underpinned by a particular epistemology, what can be called knowing for. This is the practice of speaking for others while excluding them from the act of knowledge creation (Spivak, 1988/2023). It assumes that expertise is neutral, objective, and universal. In the context of neurodivergence, 'knowing for'manifests in standardised policy templates that treat lived experience as anecdotal or irrational, and that rely on professional mediation, including psychologists, educators, human resource managers, to define what counts as inclusion (Botha & Cage, 2022; Precious, 2021).

Yet this mode of knowledge is deeply exclusionary. McGoey's (2012) sociology of ignorance shows that ignorance is not merely a lack of knowledge but a structured social outcome, something institutions produce to maintain control. In neurodiversity policy, ignorance appears as strategic unknowing: policymakers and managers often remain unaware of neurodivergent experiences because their frameworks of knowledge actively suppress them. For example, organisational surveys frequently capture only formally disclosed disabilities, thereby erasing those who mask or choose not to disclose; similarly, consultation exercises often rely on written submissions or formal meetings that exclude sensory or communication differences (Santuzzi et al., 2014). Such procedural filters systematically narrow whose experiences are recognised as policy knowledge. The apparent neutrality of evidence-based policy can therefore serve as a form of epistemic violence, silencing those whose modes of expression do not conform to bureaucratic or neurotypical expectations.

This epistemic hierarchy, where policymakers know for neurodivergent individuals, also forecloses imagination. When policy is constrained by existing categories of diagnosis and compliance, it cannot envision alternative futures. As Dewey (1909/2009) observed, democracy is not a fixed system but a method of inquiry: a collective experiment in imagining how we might live together. To be democratic, then, policy must remain open to uncertainty, difference, and co-creation. Technocratic governance, by contrast, seeks to close the loop, eliminating ambiguity through codified rules and performance metrics. In doing so, it suffocates the very creativity required to address the complex social realities of neurodivergence.

2.3 Critical pragmatism: policy as collaborative inquiry

To move beyond these limits, critical pragmatism offers a productive philosophical alternative. Rooted in Dewey's pragmatism but sharpened by critical theory (Forester, 2013; Morgan, 2014), critical pragmatism views policymaking as an ethical and participatory form of problem-solving. It insists that theory and practice evolve together, through dialogue, reflection, and action. Rather than imposing predetermined solutions, critical pragmatism begins with problematisation, asking whose problems are being addressed, whose voices are included, and what forms of knowledge are legitimised.

In a critical pragmatist frame, policy is not an expert product but a social experiment in democracy. It is iterative, reflexive, and situated. This approach resonates with the process model of HR-led co-design (Özbilgin et al., 2025a), which treats organisational transformation as a recursive cycle of challenge, intervention, and feedback. Applying this to policy means understanding policymaking as an open system: one that learns from those it aims to serve. The focus shifts from fixing deficits to redesigning systems. For example, instead of drafting a workplace policy that specifies standardised reasonable adjustments for autistic employees, a critical pragmatist approach would convene autistic staff, managers and HR practitioners in a joint inquiry into everyday work practices. Participants would examine how meeting formats, performance metrics and communication norms create friction, and would prototype alternative arrangements such as asynchronous collaboration, sensory-aware workspaces and revised evaluation criteria (Doyle & McDowall, 2022; McDowall et al., 2023; Moyà-Köhler & Domènech, 2024). The policy would develop through shared experimentation and ongoing revision in response to lived experience (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022).

2.4 From management of difference to recognition of plurality

The technocratic paradigm manages difference through inclusion quotas, awareness days, or reasonable adjustments. Critical pragmatism, in contrast, seeks the recognition of

plurality. Honneth's (1996) theory of recognition underscores that justice emerges not from tolerance but from mutual acknowledgement. For neurodivergent citizens, recognition means being seen not as cases for accommodation but as co-authors of policy. Recognition transforms inclusion from a transactional act into a relational one, grounded in dialogue and respect.

Recognition also implies that institutions themselves must change. A policy system built on fixed categories, disabled/non-disabled, normal/abnormal, cannot accommodate the fluid realities of neurodivergence. As Forester (2013) argues, critical pragmatism treats conflict and diversity not as problems to be eliminated but as resources for collective learning. Policies informed by this view become living documents, capable of revision, adaptation, and imagination.

2.5 Sociotechnical systems: embedding inclusivity structurally

While critical pragmatism provides the ethical and epistemological foundation, sociotechnical systems theory (STS) (Emery & Trist, 1973; Pasmore, 1988) offers the structural and organisational scaffolding. STS reminds us that policies are not only discursive texts but also systems of practice, a mesh of technologies, workflows, and relationships. Inclusion therefore requires joint optimisation: aligning social and technical elements so that both human diversity and institutional efficiency can thrive. In neuroinclusion, this could mean co-designing accessibility software, flexible recruitment protocols, or sensory-aware workplaces together with neurodivergent users (Özbilgin et al., 2025a).

By combining critical pragmatism and STS, policy can transcend the technocratic logic of 'knowing for'and move towards a participatory logic of 'imagining with'. Such a shift requires institutions to reimagine policy as design: a cyclical process of inquiry, prototyping, reflection, and revision. It repositions neurodivergent individuals from passive beneficiaries to active designers of social systems.

Technocratic policy-making constrains neuroinclusion by privileging expert knowledge, reproducing neuronormativity, and foreclosing imagination. Critical pragmatism and sociotechnical design together open a pathway towards participatory policy-making that is ethical, relational, and adaptive. The next section develops this vision into a process model for neuroinclusion as imagination, a practical approach to co-designing policy with neurodivergent individuals. This critique also resonates with longstanding insights from disability studies. The social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) shifted attention from individual impairment to disabling environments; crip theory (McRuer, 2008; Kafer, 2013) exposes how institutions normalise particular bodies and minds; and the neurodiversity

movement (Singer, 2017; Walker, 2021; den Houting, 2019) reframes neurological difference as human variation rather than deficit. Neuroinclusion, as imagination builds on these traditions, extends their epistemic claims into the domain of policy design itself.

3. Neuroinclusion as Imagination: Policy as Co-Design

Neuroinclusion as imagination is developed here as a policy logic grounded in co-design. The discussion distinguishes representation from co-creation and shows how consultation can secure presence while leaving agenda-setting and authorship unchanged. The HR-led co-design model is adapted into a cyclical policy process linking challenge, intervention and outcome, with iterative feedback loops that reframe policymaking as democratic inquiry rather than compliance management. Methodological practices that cultivate imagination as disciplined collective work are specified, alongside the sociotechnical conditions required to prevent participatory design from remaining symbolic. The section concludes by foregrounding the ethical commitments of imagining with, where humility, recognition and shared responsibility become integral to policy design and institutional learning.

3.1 From representation to co-creation

Policy discourse has traditionally centred on representation: ensuring that diverse voices are present within deliberative spaces. Yet representation alone does not guarantee inclusion. Neurodivergent people are often invited into consultative processes only to find that the agenda, language, and methods are already predetermined. Their participation is symbolic, , what Arnstein (1969) once called a "tokenistic rung" on the ladder of participation. For example, a public consultation on workplace accessibility may invite neurodivergent employees to comment on a draft policy that has already fixed the structure of working hours, communication norms and performance criteria. Participants are asked to suggest minor adjustments within predetermined parameters, while core assumptions about productivity and behaviour remain intact (Botha & Cage, 2022; Horton et al., 2024). In such cases, presence is secured, yet authorship is not redistributed (Silverman, 2019).

Co-design, by contrast, demands shared authorship. It goes beyond representation towards co-creation, where those affected by a policy are involved in its design, testing, and continual revision. Building on wider traditions of co-production and participatory governance (Ostrom, 1996; Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Sanders & Stappers, 2008), and extending Özbilgin et al.'s (2025) HR-led co-design model into the policy sphere. Co-design thus becomes the mechanism through which neuroinclusion operates as a form of imagination, a collective re-imagining of what policy is, who creates it, and how it learns.

Whereas 'knowing for' relies on prediction, control, and compliance, 'imagining with' rests on curiosity, experimentation, and reciprocity. Imagination here is not fantasy but a form of grounded creativity, the capacity to see beyond current institutional arrangements by engaging with diverse ways of sensing and knowing. Neurodivergent experiences often embody precisely such alternative epistemologies: nonlinear thinking, pattern recognition, sensory sensitivity, or intense focus can all expand the repertoire of what institutions consider rational. Co-design allows these differences to inform policy substance and process alike.

3.2 Translating HR-led co-design into a policy process model

Drawing on the process model proposed in HR-Led Co-Design for Neuroinclusion (Özbilgin et al., 2025a), the approach can be adapted to policymaking through a three-phase cyclical model structured around challenge, intervention and outcome, supported by continuous feedback loops. In this model, each policy challenge is connected to a corresponding co-design intervention and anticipated outcome, illustrating how imagination may displace compliance as the organising logic of policy.Table 1. Cyclical neuroinclusive policy co-design framework

Challenge (policy dysfunction)	Co-design intervention (imaginative practice)	Expected outcome (transformative change)
Legal ambiguity: Policies treat neurodivergence as a fixed diagnostic category, creating uncertainty over who qualifies for support.	Participatory interpretation forums, where neurodivergent individuals, lawyers, and policymakers jointly reinterpret existing statutes through lived experience.	Context-sensitive legislation reflecting the diversity of neurodivergent realities and clarifying grey zones such as self-diagnosed conditions.
Ignorance and lack of buy-in: Policymakers and organisational leaders underestimate neurodivergent contributions.	Shared inquiry and storytelling sessions integrating arts-based and sensory methods to surface unacknowledged forms of knowledge.	Empathic understanding and attitudinal change, moving institutions from awareness to action.
Disclosure dilemmas: Fear of stigma or bureaucratic	Confidential participatory mapping of access barriers,	Trust and safety within policy spaces; increased

exposure deters neurodivergent participation.	using anonymous digital tools co-designed by neurodivergent technologists.	voluntary engagement in public consultation and employment schemes.
Resistance to systemic change: Bureaucratic inertia or political scepticism labels inclusion as "woke" or "non-essential."	Iterative feedback loops and recognition-based accountability mechanisms that track relational rather than numerical indicators of inclusion.	Institutional learning capacity, policy becomes adaptive, relational, and resilient to backlash.

This cyclical model mirrors Dewey's (1909/2009) logic of inquiry: problems are not solved once and for all but continuously re-examined as conditions evolve. Neuroinclusive imagination thus functions as a recursive design practice, embedding neurodivergent participation across the entire policy lifecycle, from agenda-setting to evaluation. The next section illustrates these dynamics through cases from global governance, national schemes, higher education and corporate practice.

Critics may argue that policymakers rarely have time for such iterative cycles under conditions of fiscal austerity and political urgency. Yet evidence from rapid design methods in public innovation labs suggests that short, structured co-design sprints, sometimes lasting only days, can improve implementation speed by reducing downstream resistance and policy failure (Leoni, 2025). In this sense, imagination is not an added burden but a risk-mitigation strategy.

3.3 Reframing imagination as a policy method

Imagination, in this framework, is a disciplined collective act rather than a whimsical one. It involves speculative reasoning grounded in lived experience. Policies for neuroinclusion often falter because they rely on extrapolation from what already exists; they attempt to "scale up" small pilots or retrofit neurotypical systems. Imaginative policy instead asks: what if institutions were designed differently from the start?

Methods for cultivating imaginative policymaking include:

- Speculative workshops, where neurodivergent and neurotypical participants prototype alternative futures of work, education, or welfare.

- Narrative and sensory ethnography, capturing experiences that elude quantitative metrics.

- Scenario co-writing, inviting participants to visualise inclusive futures and the steps needed to reach them.

- Embodied mapping, using movement, art, or sound to communicate sensory dimensions of policy design.

These methods embody critical pragmatism's ethos: theory emerges from practice, and imagination is inseparable from experimentation. By incorporating neurodivergent sensory and cognitive diversity into these exercises, policy design becomes a multimodal rather than purely linguistic practice, one that values silence, pattern, colour, and rhythm as legitimate forms of knowledge. Such multimodal approaches draw on sensory ethnography and arts-based research traditions that recognise non-verbal forms of knowledge production (Pink et al., 2015; Leavy, 2020).

3.4 Sociotechnical alignment: the infrastructure of imagination

Drawing on sociotechnical systems (Emery & Trist, 1973; Pasmore, 1988), imaginative co-design must address both social and technical dimensions of policy. Without structural integration, imaginative participation risks remaining performative.

A neuroinclusive policy infrastructure involves:

1. Technical enablers – digital accessibility platforms co-designed with neurodivergent technologists; adaptive consultation tools; flexible documentation standards that accommodate diverse communication styles.

2. Social enablers – cross-disciplinary teams blending policymakers, HR specialists, neurodivergent advocates, and design researchers; inclusive leadership development rooted in empathy and reflexivity.

3. Institutional enablers – funding models that recognise co-design labour; evaluation frameworks that prioritise experiential outcomes (recognition, belonging, autonomy) alongside quantitative indicators.

Such alignment ensures that imagination is not detached from implementation. For instance, a ministry introducing a digital consultation platform might co-design the

interface with neurodivergent users, allowing alternative text formats, visual navigation pathways and asynchronous voice submissions (House of Commons, 2022; Moyà-Köhler & Domènech, 2024). The same platform could integrate feedback dashboards that display qualitative reflections alongside statistical data, enabling policymakers to track experiential outcomes in real time. In this configuration, technical architecture and participatory governance reinforce each other, embedding neuroinclusive imagination within everyday administrative routines (Doyle & McDowall, 2022; Leadbitter et al., 2021).

3.5 The ethics of 'imagining with'

At its core, neuroinclusion as imagination is an ethical project. 'imagining with' demands humility, the willingness of policymakers to suspend expertise and listen to forms of knowing that may appear disorderly or opaque. It is also a political stance: an assertion that cognitive diversity enriches democracy.

To imagine with neurodivergent individuals is to confront discomfort: institutions must grapple with ambiguity, sensory overload, or nonlinear reasoning. Yet such discomfort is productive; it destabilises the bureaucratic routines that perpetuate exclusion. As Honneth (2010) reminds us, recognition is not bestowed from above but realised through struggle and negotiation. Imaginative co-design honours that struggle by transforming it into creative energy for institutional renewal.

In summary: neuroinclusion as imagination reframes policy from a static artefact into a living, co-owned process. It integrates the ethics of critical pragmatism with the structure of sociotechnical design, ensuring that neurodivergent perspectives are not appended to policy after the fact but embedded within its very architecture. The next section applies this model to real-world examples, demonstrating how imaginative practices have begun to reshape policy spaces across sectors and countries.

4. Imaginative Policy Practices: Examples from the Field

Section Three set out the co-design logic of neuroinclusion as imagination and specified the infrastructural conditions through which participatory design becomes durable. Section Four applies this framing to four illustrative cases from global governance, national policy, higher education and corporate practice, showing how the shift from 'knowing for' to 'imagining with' is enacted in practice and where it becomes constrained. The cases draw on a combination of secondary literature, public policy documents, and practitioner reports, and are used illustratively rather than as formal comparative case studies. Methodologically, the cases are illustrative rather than comparative. They draw on a synthesis of secondary academic sources, public policy documents, organisational

reports, and practitioner materials. Their purpose is heuristic, i.e., to demonstrate how participatory design principles manifest across contexts, rather than to offer formal empirical evaluation.

4.1 The practice of imagination in policymaking

To demonstrate what 'imagining with' looks like in practice, this section analyses selected cases from global, national, and organisational levels. These examples illustrate both the promise and pitfalls of neuroinclusive policy design. Each reveals how imagination, when embraced as a method of inquiry and co-production, can transform institutions from rigid systems of control into dynamic learning environments.

The cases below were chosen for their diversity of scale and orientation: a global rights framework, a national policy initiative, an academic innovation lab, and a corporate transformation project. Analysed through the lens of critical pragmatism and sociotechnical co-design, they demonstrate how neuroinclusion moves from rhetorical intent to structural practice.

4.2 Global framework: UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006)

The CRPD represents a landmark in international human rights law, framing disability inclusion as a matter of justice and dignity rather than charity. Yet its implementation often reproduces the logic of 'knowing for': states translate its broad principles into technical checklists, access ramps, awareness days, reporting mechanisms, without engaging disabled and neurodivergent people in continuous governance.

Recent shadow reports (Inclusion International, 2023; Neurodiversity Foundation, 2024) highlight this tension: governments frequently submit progress data without community validation, and monitoring bodies rely on compliance rather than lived evaluation. From a critical pragmatist standpoint, the CRPD's potential lies not in its legalism but in its deliberative imagination: Article 4(3) explicitly mandates the participation of disabled persons in policymaking. When activated, this clause can serve as the constitutional foundation for 'imagining with'.

For instance, Finland's Ministry of Social Affairs and Health piloted participatory assemblies of neurodivergent citizens in drafting its 2022 National Disability Strategy. Instead of surveying needs, policymakers invited participants to co-write future scenarios for inclusive digital services. These imaginative exercises shifted the policy conversation from "support needs" to "innovation potential," positioning neurodivergent citizens as contributors to the digital economy rather than passive recipients of welfare.

This case underscores a central claim of this paper: neuroinclusion thrives when imagination is institutionalised, when the right to participate evolves into the capacity to co-design.

4.3 National initiative: The UK's Disability Confident Scheme: from compliance to co-design

Introduced in 2013, the UK's Disability Confident Scheme sought to encourage employers to recruit and retain disabled workers. Although well-intentioned, it has been widely critiqued for rewarding self-certification rather than verified progress (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2022). Employers earn "Confident" status through a checklist of activities, training, awareness, and adjustments, without meaningful engagement from disabled or neurodivergent staff.

From a sociotechnical perspective, this represents a misalignment between social intent and technical design. The scheme's technical system, its forms, scoring mechanisms, and performance indicators, does not optimise for inclusion; it optimises for administrative convenience. Consequently, the social system (organisational culture, leadership, employee experience) remains unchanged.

Imagining the Disability Confident Scheme through co-design would mean repositioning neurodivergent workers as policy partners. Instead of external accreditation, organisations could host internal "imagination labs," facilitated by HR and neurodivergent employees, to redesign job roles, sensory environments, and feedback systems. The metrics of success would then shift from inputs (training hours) to outcomes (voluntary disclosure rates, sense of belonging, creative contributions).

One prototype for this exists within the UK Civil Service Neurodiversity Network, which launched a cross-departmental working group in 2024 to co-develop guidance on "neuroinclusive policy writing." Through workshops blending storytelling, persona mapping, and systems design, the group produced new templates that allow for non-linear argumentation and visual communication, small but significant steps in dismantling the linguistic neuronormativity of bureaucratic writing.

This example reveals the transformative potential of moving from checking boxes to co-creating frameworks, from performative compliance to participatory imagination.

4.4 Academic innovation: UCL Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) and the Relational Welfare Lab

The UCL Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) offers a living case of how imagination can be institutionalised as method. Its Relational Welfare Lab operates at the intersection of research, community engagement, and policymaking, using participatory workshops to co-design social policies with residents of East London. Participants include neurodivergent individuals, carers, and community organisers, whose sensory and experiential insights shape the design of welfare services.

IGP's methodology mirrors Özbilgin et al.'s (2025) HR-led co-design model: it begins with shared inquiry, followed by prototyping and feedback loops. Policy recommendations are drafted collaboratively and tested in micro-settings (community centres, local councils) before being scaled. Rather than asking, "What services do you need?" the lab poses imaginative questions such as, "What would a good life look like in your neighbourhood?" or "How could institutions listen differently?"

These exercises reveal that neuroinclusive imagination is inherently relational, it transforms the very tone of policymaking. Participants report that the process itself, not merely the outcome, fosters recognition and belonging. Through the co-design of welfare metrics grounded in empathy, the IGP's model demonstrates how universities can function as mediating institutions, bridging citizens, policymakers, and lived realities through structured imagination.

4.5 Corporate example: SAP's Autism at Work programme—co-design in the private sector

In the corporate domain, SAP's Autism at Work initiative remains a benchmark. Launched in 2013, it sought to employ autistic professionals in specialised IT roles. Initially designed as a recruitment programme, it evolved into a platform for organisational redesign. With continuous feedback from neurodivergent employees, SAP restructured onboarding, mentoring, and workspace design to accommodate varied sensory and communication preferences.

What distinguishes this case from conventional diversity schemes is its recursive co-design: neurodivergent staff act as innovation partners, not only within HR but across product development and user-experience teams. The result has been measurable, higher retention, creativity, and productivity, but also cultural: neuroinclusion reframed as innovation rather than accommodation.

From a critical pragmatist view, the programme's success lies in its experimental ethos. Policies are treated as prototypes, subject to iteration based on employee feedback. By embedding learning loops into everyday practice, SAP has created a microcosm of the imaginative policymaking this paper advocates at societal scale.

4.6 Cross-case synthesis: conditions for imaginative policy

Across these diverse examples, several enabling conditions emerge:

1. Recognition as foundation: Each successful case begins with recognition of neurodivergent individuals as epistemic agents—holders of valuable knowledge, not subjects of regulation.

2. Iterative participation: Co-design is not a one-off consultation but a recurring process of inquiry, design, and feedback.

3. Structural embedding: Imagination is sustained through institutional routines, policy labs, advisory councils, or adaptive HR systems.

4. Reflexive leadership: Leaders act as facilitators rather than gatekeepers, modelling humility and openness to learning.

5. Plural metrics of success: Progress is evaluated through relational indicators, trust, belonging, creativity, alongside traditional outputs.

These elements collectively transform policy into a living system capable of adaptation and growth. They operationalise what Özbilgin (2024) terms co-ownership: the shared stewardship of institutional futures by diverse stakeholders.

In summary: These examples reveal that imagination, when embedded in institutional design, enables neuroinclusion to move from rhetoric to reality. Whether in global governance, national initiatives, academia, or corporate settings, the principles of co-design, shared inquiry, iterative feedback, and recognition-based accountability, create the conditions for genuine transformation.

The next section turns from examples to design principles: how institutions can build enduring infrastructures for co-ownership and neuroinclusive policymaking.

5. Towards Policy Co-Ownership: Institutional Conditions for Neuroinclusion

5.1 From consultation to co-ownership

In most contemporary governance frameworks, participation is still structured as consultation: the state or organisation seeks feedback on a policy already designed. This model preserves hierarchy, experts design, citizens comment, and decisions remain centrally controlled. Neuroinclusion, however, calls for a more radical reconfiguration. It demands a shift from consultation to co-ownership, where neurodivergent people are not peripheral consultees but recognised co-authors and stewards of policy systems.

As Özbilgin (2024) argues, co-ownership begins with the redistribution of epistemic authority, the recognition that knowledge about inclusion does not reside solely in institutions but is co-produced through lived experience. This is a relational rather than transactional model: policymaking becomes an ongoing conversation between neurodivergent individuals, practitioners, and decision-makers. Co-ownership thus transforms both the content and form of policy, embedding inclusion into governance as a recursive process of reflection and redesign.

Where traditional systems value control, co-ownership values care. It reframes policy as a shared responsibility, sustained through continuous learning and trust. A further challenge concerns reluctance to participate. Many neurodivergent individuals actively avoid disclosure or leadership roles due to past stigma, career penalties, or bureaucratic exposure. Co-design therefore cannot presume immediate engagement; it must first establish psychological safety through anonymity options, peer facilitation, and protections against retaliation. Participation is earned through trust, not mandated (Santuzzi et al., 2014).

5.2 Building enabling infrastructures

For co-ownership to flourish, institutions must invest in infrastructures, both tangible and symbolic, that sustain collaboration beyond symbolic participation. These infrastructures can be grouped into four interlocking domains: recognition, resources, relationships, and reflexivity.

1. Recognition: Valuing neurodivergent expertise

Recognition involves more than acknowledgment; it means institutionalising neurodivergent knowledge as legitimate expertise. This requires remunerating lived-

experience contributions, granting authorship in policy outputs, and embedding neurodivergent representatives in decision-making bodies. Recognition policies should explicitly define neurodivergent experience as professional capital, equal in value to technical or managerial expertise.

Mechanisms might include co-chairing committees with neurodivergent members, mandating neurodiversity panels in departmental reviews, or integrating recognition criteria into civil service appraisal systems. Recognition transforms neuroinclusion from a moral duty into an epistemic practice.

2. Resources: Funding imagination

Imaginative policymaking is resource-intensive. Co-design workshops, accessibility tools, and capacity-building all require sustained funding. Short-term project grants often stifle long-term collaboration. Institutions should establish participatory innovation funds, budget lines dedicated to neuroinclusive experimentation.

A promising model comes from Scotland's Inclusive Design Fund (2023–2026), which allocates community-led grants for co-designing public services. Such funding recognises imagination as a form of research and development, not an optional add-on. When resource frameworks shift from cost-minimisation to capability expansion, institutions move closer to genuine co-ownership.

3. Relationships: Reweaving the social fabric of policymaking

Policies are social contracts, and their success depends on relationships of trust. Co-ownership requires relational governance, structures that prioritise dialogue over hierarchy. Relational governance can be institutionalised through:

- Multi-stakeholder advisory councils including neurodivergent citizens, trade unions, and NGOs.

- Peer-facilitated "imagination circles" within departments, where staff and citizens collaboratively review ongoing policy issues.

- Partnership agreements between neurodiversity networks and public institutions, ensuring shared accountability.

These relational mechanisms create psychological safety, the precondition for candid dialogue about what inclusion truly entails. Trust transforms resistance into curiosity and enables institutions to navigate uncertainty without reverting to control-based reflexes.

4. Reflexivity: Learning as accountability

Traditional accountability relies on compliance metrics: audits, key performance indicators, and checklists. Co-ownership replaces this with recognition-based accountability, a system of continuous learning rather than surveillance. Drawing on Dewey's pragmatic logic, institutions must ask: what consequences do our actions produce, and what can we learn from them?

Reflexive accountability involves iterative evaluation through story-based and qualitative data, employee testimonies, case narratives, and participatory evaluations. Metrics become dialogic rather than diagnostic. The UCL IGP's Relational Welfare Lab offers a template: outcomes are reviewed jointly by participants and policymakers, turning evaluation into another cycle of co-design.

Through reflexivity, institutions evolve from being implementers of policy to learners within a shared system of imagination.

5.3 Embedding neuroinclusive leadership

Leadership is pivotal to sustaining co-ownership. In neuroinclusive systems, leaders act as facilitators of imagination rather than controllers of knowledge. This calls for a shift from command-and-control to distributed leadership, where decision-making authority is shared and adaptive.

Drawing on Ayaz et al. (2024), inclusive leaders model atypical authenticity, the courage to show vulnerability, uncertainty, and openness. In practice, this may involve senior officials attending co-design workshops not as chairs but as learners; commissioning neurodivergent mentors for executive teams; and integrating neuroinclusive leadership competencies into performance frameworks.

Neurodivergent leaders themselves often exemplify this shift. Their lived experience of navigating complex sensory and cognitive environments cultivates empathy, pattern recognition, and resilience, skills vital to governance in uncertain times. When empowered within co-ownership structures, such leaders embody the imaginative, justice-oriented ethos of critical pragmatism.

5.4 Institutionalising imagination

Imagination is a fragile capacity: without organisational scaffolding, it fades under bureaucratic pressure. To sustain neuroinclusive imagination, institutions must embed it into policy lifecycles as a repeatable process rather than an occasional experiment. This involves three structural commitments:

1. Imagination cycles – Formalise co-design sprints at key policy stages: agenda-setting, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Each cycle should culminate in a "reflection charter" documenting lessons learned.

2. Knowledge repositories – Establish open-access archives of co-designed practices, ensuring institutional memory and avoiding reinvention.

3. Capacity building – Train policymakers in participatory design, sensory literacy, and neurodiversity awareness, making imagination a professional competency.

Institutionalising imagination requires cultural as well as procedural transformation. When imagination becomes routine, neuroinclusion ceases to depend on individual champions; it becomes part of the organisation's DNA.

5.5 Intersectional inclusion: addressing layered vulnerabilities

Co-ownership must account for intersectionality (Özbilgin et al., 2025b). Neurodivergent people who are also racialised, gender-diverse, or economically marginalised face compounded misrecognition. Policies that treat neurodivergence as a single-axis category risk reproducing inequalities.

Intersectional co-design therefore demands layered participation: involving neurodivergent women, LGBTQ+ individuals, migrants, and people of colour in leadership roles within policy labs. It also calls for decolonising neuroinclusion, recognising that Western medical taxonomies of neurodiversity may not capture cultural variations in cognition and communication.

Intersectionality is not an additive checklist of identities but a structural condition in which multiple forms of misrecognition compound one another (Crenshaw, 1991). Neurodivergent migrants, women, racialised workers, or LGBTQ+ individuals often encounter layered barriers to disclosure, participation, and authority. Co-design processes must therefore examine how race, gender, class, and disability are co-produced within institutions; otherwise, neuroinclusion risks reproducing dominant norms under a different label. By

embracing intersectional imagination, co-ownership becomes a vehicle not only for neuroinclusion but for broader justice-oriented institutional reform.

5.6 From ownership to stewardship

True co-ownership ultimately evolves into stewardship, a form of shared custodianship over institutional futures. Stewardship implies continuity: neurodivergent and neurotypical stakeholders maintain the system together, iteratively refining it as contexts change. This principle aligns with the Deweyan notion of democracy as an "experiment in living," sustained through reflection and renewal.

Institutions practising stewardship no longer see neuroinclusion as a discrete policy issue but as a lens for ethical governance. They embody a civic imagination in which policies are evolving systems of practice shaped by ongoing interaction among actors, technologies, and norms.

In summary: Policy co-ownership transforms neuroinclusion from a compliance exercise into a shared act of imagination. It is anchored in four institutional conditions, recognition, resources, relationships, and reflexivity, and sustained by inclusive leadership and intersectional awareness. Through co-ownership, neurodivergent citizens become not objects of policy but co-stewards of societal transformation.

Institutional change is never neutral. Co-ownership challenges established hierarchies of expertise, managerial authority, and budget control and, predictably, encounters resistance. From a political economy perspective, audit regimes, performance targets, and short-term cost pressures often favour minimal compliance over participatory redesign (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2015). Neuroinclusive imagination must therefore be understood not simply as a technical improvement but as a redistribution of power over whose knowledge counts. The final section synthesises these insights, offering a concluding reflection and a concise roadmap for policymakers, followed by a one-page policy brief.

6. Conclusion: From Policy Compliance to Policy Imagination

Across this paper, a single question has guided our inquiry: what would policymaking look like if it were imagined with, rather than known for, neurodivergent people?

The analysis began by identifying the limits of technocratic and compliance-driven systems that treat neurodivergence as a category to be managed rather than a form of knowledge to be shared. These systems, governed by 'knowing for', perpetuate

neuronormativity and inhibit creativity. Through the twin lenses of critical pragmatism and sociotechnical systems theory, the paper has shown that genuine inclusion depends on transforming not only what policies say but how they are made.

Critical pragmatism reframes policy as a collective inquiry, an ethical experiment through which institutions and citizens co-create solutions to lived problems. It invites humility and openness to uncertainty. Sociotechnical design provides the structural counterpart, ensuring that inclusive imagination is not merely symbolic but embedded in the everyday technologies, workflows, and routines of governance. Together, they form the foundation for neuroinclusion as imagination.

The proposed process model situates policymaking as an iterative cycle linking challenges, co-design interventions, and transformative outcomes. The global and national cases reviewed, the UN CRPD, the UK's Disability Confident Scheme, the UCL Institute for Global Prosperity, and SAP's Autism at Work, illustrate both the risks of symbolic participation and the promise of institutional imagination. Where co-design has been genuinely implemented, policies have evolved from rigid compliance tools into living systems capable of learning, adapting, and caring.

To sustain these transformations, institutions must cultivate the infrastructures of policy co-ownership:

- Recognition of neurodivergent knowledge as legitimate expertise.

- Resources that fund imagination as a public good.

- Relationships that anchor policymaking in trust and reciprocity.

- Reflexivity that turns accountability into shared learning.

When these conditions converge, policy ceases to be a bureaucratic document and becomes a social relationship, one animated by mutual recognition. Neuroinclusion, then, is not simply about access or accommodation; it is about reimagining the very grammar of governance. To move from policy compliance to policy imagination is to embrace uncertainty as an ally, difference as an asset, and co-design as a democratic necessity. Such an approach does not merely serve neurodivergent citizens; it renews democracy itself by widening the circle of who gets to imagine the future. These proposals unfold in a political climate increasingly sceptical of equality initiatives, where inclusion is caricatured as "woke" excess (Erbil et al., 2026). Precisely in such contexts, participatory design offers

a pragmatic rather than ideological case for neuroinclusion (Ozbilgin et al., 2025a): institutions that ignore cognitive diversity forfeit innovation, talent retention, and public trust. The argument for imagination is therefore economic as well as ethical.

Policy Brief

This brief translates the conceptual argument of the paper into actionable guidance. It supports policymakers, public institutions and employers in shifting from compliance-oriented approaches to participatory design practices that treat neurodivergent people as epistemic partners. The aim is to embed neuroinclusion structurally, not as a marginal add-on but as a core governance principle.

Neuroinclusion Through Imagination: Co-Designing Futures with Neurodivergent Citizens

Purpose

To guide policymakers, public institutions, and employers in embedding neuroinclusion as a participatory, imaginative practice rather than a compliance exercise.

Key Insights

Neuroinclusion becomes transformative when it moves from accommodation to co-authorship. Policies designed with neurodivergent actors generate adaptive institutions capable of learning and redesign. The integration of critical pragmatism and sociotechnical design ensures that ethical commitments are reinforced by structural mechanisms, preventing imagination from remaining rhetorical.

1. Policy-making for neurodivergent people is insufficient – genuine inclusion requires policy-making with them.

2. Co-design and imagination transform governance – by integrating lived experience as expertise, policies become adaptive and just.

3. Critical pragmatism + Sociotechnical design = durable inclusion – ethical reflection must pair with structural redesign.

Core Recommendations

The recommendations translate the co-design framework into institutional action across governance levels. As outlined in Table 2, each level specifies a structural intervention and

its anticipated impact, linking participatory mechanisms to institutional trust, innovation capacity and long-term inclusion outcomes.

Table 2. Neuroinclusive co-design recommendations and implementation framework

Level	Action	Expected Impact
National Government	Establish Neuroinclusive Policy Labs that convene neurodivergent citizens, civil servants, and researchers to co-design legislation and evaluate impact.	Participatory policymaking and trust in institutions.
Public Sector Organisations	Embed co-design cycles within policy and HR processes (recruitment, wellbeing, training). Replace token consultation with iterative collaboration.	Sustainable neuroinclusion and innovation in service design.
Corporate Sector	Develop Recognition-based Accountability Systems, measuring relational outcomes such as belonging, engagement, and creativity.	Culturally inclusive workplaces and improved retention.
Education and Training	Introduce Imaginative Policy Modules in public administration and management programmes; teach participatory design and sensory literacy.	A new generation of reflexive, inclusive leaders.
Cross-sector Partnerships	Fund Participatory Research and Innovation Grants to explore neuroinclusion at the	Intersectionally informed policy innovation and strengthened collaborative capacity across sectors.

	intersection of gender, race, and class.	

Implementation Principles

Implementation requires sustained institutional commitment. Recognition legitimises lived experience as expertise. Resources ensure that co-design is funded and continuous. Relationships cultivate trust and psychological safety. Reflexive practices enable learning through participatory evaluation rather than procedural compliance. These principles can be operationalised through the following commitments:

- Recognise lived experience as policy knowledge.

- Resource co-design as R&D for social innovation.

- Relate through trust-building and continuous dialogue.

- Reflect using participatory evaluation and storytelling.

Indicators of Progress

Progress should be assessed through both structural and relational measures. Representation in leadership signals redistribution of authority. Voluntary disclosure reflects psychological safety. The proliferation of co-design labs indicates institutionalisation of imagination. Evaluation frameworks incorporating qualitative metrics demonstrate a shift from numerical compliance to experiential accountability. Such progress may be tracked through the following indicators:

- Growth of neurodivergent representation in policy leadership roles.

- Increased voluntary disclosure and psychological safety in organisations.

- Emergence of co-design labs and neuroinclusive innovation hubs across sectors.

- Policy evaluation frameworks incorporating qualitative and relational metrics.

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