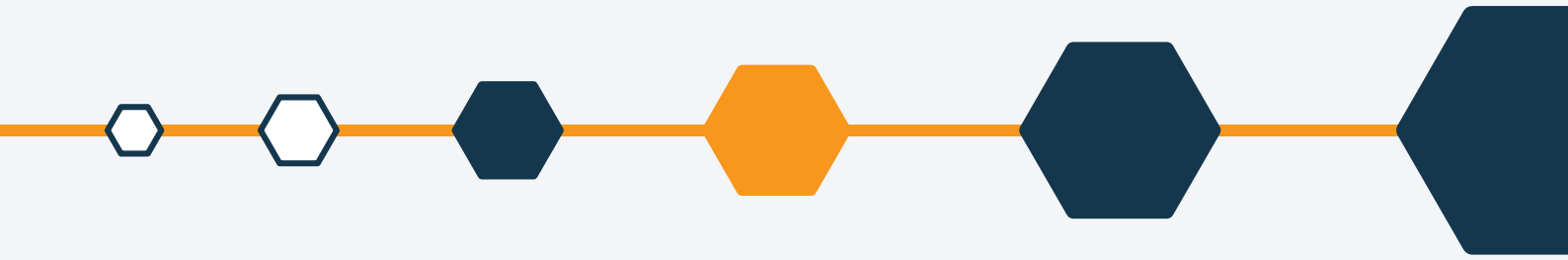
Council on the Ageing Queensland | Sector Support & Development

Stronger together:

what the Tablelands Collaborative can teach us about regional partnership

In early 2025, a group of aged care providers on the Atherton Tablelands in Far North Queensland came together for the first Tablelands Collaborative workshop. What they built next offers useful lessons for CHSP-funded aged care providers across Australia.



1

The problem with going it alone

Distance is part of life on the Atherton Tablelands. Providers here cover large distances with limited resources, and travel to Cairns for clinical and specialist appointments can take 90 minutes or more by road. Most organisations in the region don't just do aged care. Better Together, for example, runs 16 programs across 5 sectors.

Into that environment came the new Aged Care Act, the strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards and a stream of changes to reporting, assessment and service types. Providers were looking for better ways to navigate those changes together.

Laree Verra, CEO of Better Together, summed up the barrier at the Collaborative's first workshop in March 2025. Her organisation had always been open to partnership, but finding the time and resources to maintain those relationships was difficult.

> **"What generally gets in the way of good partnership is having the time and the resources to put into that relationship building. Sometimes our best intentions fall down because we just run out of time and energy."**

Judi Enoch, CEO of Ngoonbi Community Services Indigenous Organisation, adds:

> **"Not having the opportunities to come together like this. That's the only thing that stopped us."**

90
minutes or more by road to Cairns

16
programs across 5 sectors (Better Together)

2

From a workshop to a working partnership

That first in-person workshop, hosted by Council on the Ageing (COTA) Queensland's Sector Support and Development team, brought the region's CHSP-funded providers into one place to talk about what was holding them back and what they wanted from working together. It was the start of the Tablelands and Surrounds Collaborative.

The group went on to meet every month, with both face-to-face and online meetings. Members developed a Foundational Charter that set out who they were, what they shared and what they wanted to work on together. They then developed a Collaborative Agreement covering common goals, member roles and how decisions would be made. Between meetings, members stayed connected by phone and email.

The critical decision was who sits at the table. "Decision-makers," says Laree. "Both strategic and operational leadership, so we had the right people in the room. When the CEO or the coordinator of CHSP is in the room and is empowered to make a decision, collaboration and the level of trust go up. If someone says they're going to do something, it gets done."

3

What they worked on

Over 18 months, the Collaborative turned shared priorities into action. Members:

- prepared together for the 1 November 2025 commencement of the new Act, using shared reform readiness and My Aged Care audit tools
- developed and shared practical tools, including an audit evidence collection tool and a dignity of risk consent form
- mapped services and resources across the region against My Aged Care
- supported one another through Service Delivery Assessment Program and specialisation verification applications
- worked on a coordinated approach to transporting older people across services, given the distances and cost involved
- explored how to advocate for later-in-the-day clinical and specialist appointments in Cairns, to better accommodate travel from the Tablelands
- shared staff expertise across organisations, including between Ngoonbi and Ravenshoe's Rural and Remote Home Care Services.
- celebrated each other's milestones.

18

months turning shared priorities into action

The Collaborative gave Better Together the confidence to redesign client intake from scratch. Posting out forms wasn't working. New clients were often unclear about My Aged Care, their assessment and what they'd agreed to. Now a dedicated intake officer walks each new client through the process, in person or by phone.

"We would not have had the confidence to put all of that in place without the help of our partners in the Tablelands Collaborative and COTA Queensland," Laree says. "And to be really confident that it's compliant, not only with the new expectations from the Department but with how we work, our practice framework, the way we want to treat our clients."

The benefits

For organisations. Reform information arrives fast and in volume. “If you have strong partners and good flows of information,” Laree says, “you feel like you don’t have to know every single thing. You’re not going to miss something important, because there are more eyes than yours on it.”

For older people. The most important benefit is the least visible. As Laree puts it: “If we weren’t able to navigate all of this change, there would have been some attrition from the sector. The smaller organisations like ours would have really struggled to maintain operations at all.” In a region with a handful of providers, a single organisation closing its doors means older people losing services.

For staff. Frontline and operational staff have peers in other organisations they can call when problems arise. The Collaborative also changed how some leaders think about staff movement between providers. Rather than focusing only on losing an employee to another organisation, Laree points to the value of keeping that person’s expertise in the region.

Keys to success

The right people in the room. Decision-makers, not delegates. If the person at the table can't commit their organisation, the group stalls.

Permission to be vulnerable. Laree says trust grew when leaders felt able to admit they were struggling or didn't have all the answers: "You think, okay, I'm in a safe place. We can work on this problem together."

No patch protecting. "In a small region like ours, we're not in competition with each other," Laree says. "Taking a patch-protecting stance in the regions just doesn't work."

A narrow focus and a regular rhythm. Because most members ran multiple programs across multiple sectors, the monthly meeting dedicated solely to CHSP kept attention on a sector that would otherwise compete for it. "It keeps us accountable around keeping up with sector developments," Laree says.

Respect, and a bit of country style. "We're a friendly bunch. We're in a territory where everybody says hello," says Judi. "We take that into meetings. What's made it succeed is that we're all willing to talk, share and respect one another."

An external facilitator. Sustaining collaboration while organisations manage day-to-day pressures takes time and effort. COTA Queensland's Sector Support and Development team facilitated the Tablelands Collaborative and helped maintain its momentum. As Laree explains, without someone committed to keeping the group going, "we probably would have gotten exhausted in the process".

Judi is equally clear about the value of facilitation: "It would not happen otherwise."

The Tablelands experience shows the value an external facilitator can bring. Consider who in your region has the neutrality, credibility, capacity and time to bring organisations together and maintain momentum while members retain responsibility for decisions and outcomes.

Lessons along the way

Like any new partnership, the Collaborative learned and adapted as it developed. Its experience offers some practical lessons for other regions.

Tools should follow need, not lead it. COTA Queensland trialled an online platform for members to share information. It was discontinued. The group found that phone calls, emails and the meetings themselves did the job.

Priorities will shift, and that's fine. The Charter's initial joint action plan was realigned partway through to focus squarely on reform readiness. A collaborative needs to be able to reprioritise as the sector changes.

Build it before you need it. Established relationships give providers people to call when challenges arise.

Reflect deliberately. The group set aside its December 2025 meeting to reflect on benefits and outcomes, and evaluate progress against its goals. Momentum is easier to sustain when members can see what they've achieved.

The unexpected outcomes

One of the Collaborative's unexpected outcomes was the relationship that developed between Ngoonbi and Better Together.

> **"We see Better Together as a sister organisation," says Judi. "Sometimes we put divides and barriers up between our services, only for the fact that we don't know each other. But it's been wonderful."**

For Laree, the relationship has opened the door to deeper conversations about the operational pressures both organisations face. And when Better Together launched its Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan in mid-2026, members of Ngoonbi were there.

Ngoonbi also brought an important cultural lens to the Collaborative. Judi explains that Ngoonbi was established as a care-based organisation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders. That legacy shapes Ngoonbi's willingness to work with other organisations caring for Elders.

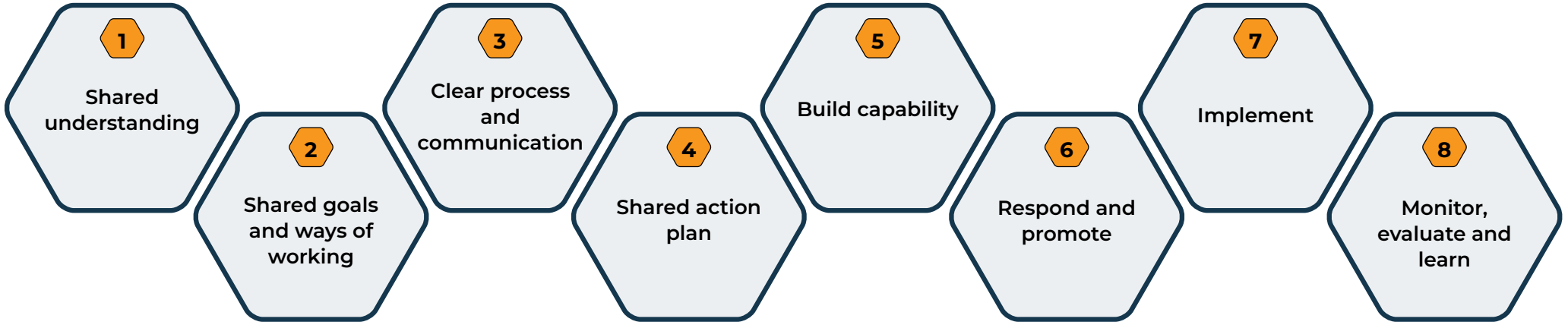
The Collaborative also strengthened the region's collective voice, providing a way for members to offer localised input into how aged care reforms and services are rolled out across the region.

And perhaps the simplest lasting benefit is knowing who to call.

> **"When you can place a name to an organisation, you can call them and say, hey, have you thought about this? How would you do this?"**

A framework you can use

The CHSP Collaborative Partnership Framework provides a flexible structure that can be adapted to local context and different levels of collaboration.



Collaboration continuum

Choose the level that suits your shared purpose.

Network Information exchange for mutual benefit

Coordinate Alter some activities to achieve a shared purpose

Cooperate Share resources, such as staff, facilities and policies

Collaborate Enhance each other's capacity

Integrate Combine operations, administration, resources and budgets

CHSP Collaborative Partnership Framework

The Tablelands experience shows that collaboration can deepen over time without merger being the goal. Different aspects of the partnership moved beyond networking into coordination, cooperation and shared learning.

Practical tools helped turn the intent to collaborate into agreed ways of working. The Tablelands Collaborative developed a Foundational Charter and Collaborative Agreement, mapped stakeholders and services and used a progress matrix to track how the partnership was developing.

Where to start

If you lead a CHSP-funded organisation and there's no collaborative in your region, the Tablelands experience suggests a short list.

1. **Consider who can facilitate.**
2. **Invite decision-makers.**
3. **Create opportunities to meet.** Start face to face if you can, then establish a regular rhythm that works for the group.
4. **Agree how you'll work together.** A short Charter can capture your shared purpose and first priorities.
5. **Pick one problem you can't solve alone.** Start working on it together and build from there.

The last word

> Laree's advice to other leaders is simple: "They should absolutely do it. There's nothing like feeling that you're hitting the mark with your decision-making than getting a diverse group of people in the room and really hashing out a problem."

> Judi brings it back to the regional reality: "It's far better for us to work collectively than as an individual operation."

Watch the Tablelands Collaborative video series

Stronger together: Collaborating through aged care reform – with Laree Verra, Better Together

Better connected: Sharing knowledge, solutions and support – with Judi Enoch, Ngoonbi Community Services Indigenous Organisation

The Tablelands and Surrounds Collaborative was established with the support of the COTA Queensland Sector Support and Development Team.

For more resources, reform updates and webinars, visit the CHSP Provider Hub: bit.ly/cotaq-hub

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