

Since the start of Operation HERRICK 14 in April this year, the Military Stabilisation Support Group (MSSG) in Helmand province has helped with a number of projects that have directly benefited people's lives.

The MSSG is drawn from all three Services, as well as the Reserve Forces, and consists of 50 personnel divided into six Military Stabilisation Support Teams (MSSTs) who are spread out over the British area of operations in Helmand.

The Group's role is to deliver stabilisation effect and assist the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) in delivering vital services to the population, in an effort to establish it as the dominant political and economic force.

This is achieved in a number of ways: assisting with infrastructure projects, advising the battle group on stabilisation-related activities, gathering information regarding the various issues facing the local populace, and empowering the local government and line ministries to deliver their full potential.

It is by getting out on the ground and developing relationships with locals that the MSSTs attempt to gain insight and local knowledge of how best to deliver stabilisation effect.

Amongst the projects the MSSG has worked on during the course of HERRICK 14 is the extensive refurbishment of the local bazaar in Chah-e Anjir which has allowed local commerce to take hold in an area that as recently as six months ago saw fighting on the streets.

This model has subsequently been rolled out to various other bazaars to achieve a similar effect.

In Lashkar Gah, the MSSG has been focused on improving the infrastructure in the more rural north of the district as parts of the city have now formally entered the transition process and, as a result, Afghan National Security Forces are the lead security authority in the metropolitan area.

Nahr-e Saraj has also benefited from a number of infrastructure improvements including a new district government office and a new maternity ward for the local hospital.

Petty Officer Dylan Mingard, one of numerous Royal Naval personnel working in the MSSG, said:

"Stabilisation is a challenging role because even with the simplest of tasks, the second, third and fourth order effects need to be taken into consideration. For example, will the well you build here disenfranchise the population over there?"

In addition to supporting development projects, MSSG teams are frequently called upon to provide advice and solutions to brigade-level operations.

During Operation OMID HAFT, for example, which was a joint operation involving 500 British and Afghan troops in May 2011 to expand the protected community of the central Helmand River Valley, several MSST operators were called upon to provide advice on conducting compound takeovers and immediate stabilisation effect, or 'hot stabilisation' as it is known.

The MSSG also played a role in the clearance of the Loy Mandeh bazaar which had previously been an insurgent stronghold.

The MSST role is at times frustrating but frequently rewarding. Real progress has been achieved in developing the area and laying the way for the locals to stand on their own and achieve a stable transition to GIRoA control.

Chief Petty Officer Craig Cuthbert, another member of the Royal Navy working in the MSSG, said:

"The highlight for me has been working on the school which is right next to our base. Slowly but surely it's getting the support it requires and the teacher is now a good friend who regularly comes over for a chat, normally trading water melons for ration pack chocolate."

Petty Officer Mingard admits that while it's been a great experience, everyone is looking forward to seeing friends and family:

"After six months living in a PB [patrol base], I am looking forward to some time at home in my new flat with my partner Joanna. Also can't wait for half-term when I can have my three children for a few days and show them what their father has been up to for six months."