



# Frontline FM: managing the estate in the field

*When the first UK troops arrived in the remote province of Helmand, Southern Afghanistan in 2005, their operating base was nothing more than a series of grid squares in the middle of a desert. What exists today could not be more different; Camp Bastion is an extensive site hosting over 10,000 troops and this is just one of five main operating bases in Afghanistan that British troops rely on. Here, Rhian Williams of Defence Estates tells MOD DCB more.*

**R**unning the facilities occupied by British troops in Afghanistan is definitely estate management with a difference. Managed by 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group, the infrastructure that makes up the five main British operating bases in Afghanistan, and over 150 smaller tactical bases, amounts to a very demanding estate portfolio to manage and develop.

Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Browse, Commanding Officer of 63 Works Group Royal Engineers, one of four works groups that rotate in and out of theatre, ran the infrastructure in Afghanistan from September 2009 until March 2010. He explains: "We deliver and maintain about £100 million worth of infrastructure every year over the main operating bases and the forward tactical bases and the maintenance piece is a very significant part of that."

The British Forces infrastructure in Afghanistan is arguably the most critical piece of defence estate anywhere in the world and it presents unique challenges. But the basic principles of Facilities Management (FM) are exactly the same in Afghanistan as anywhere else, and as the division of defence with the largest pool of experienced facilities managers, DE has been invited to provide support.

Colonel Iain Wright, who manages the deployment of DE staff to Afghanistan, observes: "The military can do 'facilities management' but they do not have people who have been doing it day in, day out for 30 years. So, if you're wanting to manage a contractor, having an experienced DE civilian to support that facilities management team strengthens the MOD's overall position."

Currently, when a works group deploys it takes 60 personnel, of which two are DE facilities managers. They form part of a six-man FM team (with the other four members coming from the works group), who manage the delivery of contracted work at Camp Bastion, Kandahar, Kabul, Gereshk and Lashkar Gah.

The maintenance of infrastructure in Afghanistan is largely delivered through an Infrastructure Support Provider (ISP), under a contract that is currently valued at around £175 million. This was let by DE's international commercial team in 2006 but is managed locally by 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group.

Outside of this a number of Afghan and international contractors also deliver services to support the British set-up in theatre. The Afghan First policy ensures that wherever possible, local contractors are given the opportunity to compete for work alongside their larger international counterparts.

For 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group, contracting with local people brings the additional challenges of ensuring that British funds do not slip into illicit economies, as well as the inherent cultural and language barriers. But that's a small price to pay for the more strategic rewards, which include improving the overall economic situation and political stability in Afghanistan.

Through the Afghan First initiative, military infrastructure in theatre isn't just facilitating the British mission in Afghanistan, it is becoming part of the long-term

solution there. So with commerce playing such an important role, it is vital that the letting and management of contracts is managed efficiently.

DE provides commercial support to 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group's contract officers with its international commercial team not only letting and managing contracts in Afghanistan on behalf of the Permanent Joint Headquarters, but also providing pre-deployment training and mentoring in commercial activities for those military officers who are going to hold commercial delegations in theatre.

In addition, on a rotation basis, a DE commercial officer is now constantly present in Afghanistan to provide commercial advice on the ground.

In Lt. Col Browse's view, the benefits of having a DE commercial officer in theatre are very clear. He explains: "The critical thing is that they [DE specialists] bring a skill and commercial awareness that we don't necessarily have in the military and so we are provided with a level of governance and assurance for spending military infrastructure funds that we wouldn't otherwise get."

Resource-wise, there are other practical advantages. "Because DE staff are a non-military resource, they allow me to fill a capability gap that I perhaps couldn't otherwise fill," he adds.

The longer term benefits of this arrangement include a two-way skill and knowledge transfer between DE's commercial officer and the Royal Engineers' works contracts officers. Lt. Col Browse explains: "The DE commercial staff mentor my works contracts officers which means they can develop their skills while on operations, which is undoubtedly a good thing."

Col Wright sees what DE staff members get in return. "They get the opportunity to be part of the execution of a military operation, which is more than the average civil servant has the opportunity to experience," he says. "You join the MOD to work in support of defence but very little 'defence' happens in the UK. The outputs of defence generally happen somewhere else. One of the things that I think attracts people is to be involved where it happens."

Lt. Col Browse adds: "I think the most important thing DE personnel learn in theatre is pragmatism. When you are on operations sometimes you have to take risks against quality or time, in order to get something delivered that is needed to support operations."

"The other thing I hope we give them is a better understanding about how the military works, what drives us and our procedures. I hope they take away a much broader understanding of the military in general."

This successful model for exchanging skills may be extended to other disciplines in the future. "Afghanistan represents a bigger and more concentrated estate management challenge than we have had in any of the other recent campaigns and it has highlighted the need for the military to augment their commercial skills," Col Wright explains.

"We are now looking at ways in which, through this sort of engagement, we can contribute to the development of the facilities management and contract auditing skills

of our military colleagues."

Infrastructure management in Afghanistan is both fast-paced and operationally focused: "It's all about creating new capability and delivering operational effect," Lt. Col Browse says. "We don't do anything unless it is in direct support of operations." This makes demanding work for the Royal Engineers and their DE counterparts.

"There is a large amount of flexibility required. Some days you'll be in the office at 6am and you won't leave until 11pm at night. The volume of work and the fact that things change on an almost daily basis, means you have to build-in a degree of adaptability in order to deliver it. In the UK and elsewhere, it is not quite so turbulent."

That's not the only difference. "Failure in estate maintenance or delivery has a significantly larger effect on operations than it would at home," Lt. Col Browse adds. "For example, if some ablutions fail here it is not the end of the world. But out there [Afghanistan], with the high temperatures and the risk of disease or viruses spreading because people can't wash their hands, then it fast becomes a force protection issue."

And the land that hosts these critical facilities is just as vital. Mike Birchall, a senior DE land agent, deploys on a periodic basis to assist the Royal Engineers with any land-related issues they may encounter, including acquisition and disposal. During Lt. Col Browse's last tour in Afghanistan, Mr Birchall assisted with securing much-needed patches of land in Lashkar Gah and Kabul.

"Securing this land from the ministry of aviation in Kabul has allowed us to build a much more effective and safer main entrance point into our base there," explains Lt. Col Browse. "On the land we had available to us before, we were only able to build a small entry point with insufficient stand-off distances. What we have now is a much longer, bigger and safer main entry point as a direct result of Mr Birchall's negotiations."

Talking generally about the support DE provides to the 170 (Infrastructure Support) Engineer Group, Lt. Col Browse concludes: "It plays a small but critical role in the infrastructure delivery and estate management process."

"DE personnel bring skills to my works group which I don't necessarily have embedded in it, including a knowledge of complex commercial procedures and estate management best practice. I hope we send them back to DE more widely experienced, more knowledgeable and with a clear focus on what operational infrastructure delivery and maintenance is all about."

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