

# Annual Qualitative Assessment of HMG's Stabilisation Unit

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Stabilisation Unit

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has carried out an Annual Qualitative Assessment (“AQA” or “assessment”) of the Stabilisation Unit (SU), covering the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018. The AQA process was introduced as a response to recommendations in the December 2017 ‘Review of the Stabilisation Unit’ and is therefore the first such AQA. The assessment reviewed performance against the three outcomes in the SU Business Plan: *Policy into delivery*, *Strengthening international partnerships* and *Learning from experience*. The assessment also explored how the SU fits within and engages with HMG conflict architecture, how it contributes to wider HMG objectives and international stabilisation activity, and how SU captures progress towards stated objectives. The purpose of the assessment is to provide SU (and HMG) with evidence and analysis from which lessons can be learned and opportunities maximised.

For the assessment, the ODI team were provided with 6 case studies from SU:

1. Engagement on countries/regions: Western Balkans
2. National School of Government International (NSGI) support to the NATO–Ukraine Professional Development Programme (PDP)
3. Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia Conflict, Security and Stability Fund Gender Audit
4. Engagement on countries/regions: Somalia
5. Inputs into the EU Integrated Approach to Stabilisation and bilateral working groups on stabilisation
6. Support to the Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC)

To ensure enough evidence was captured on SU activity and to be able to provide a more holistic assessment with meaningful recommendations, the AQA has also interviewed stakeholders surrounding the case studies on broader SU impact as well as looking at the work of the SU lessons team. The team initially ran a desk review, analysing documentation provided by SU on the case studies and then conducted interviews with a broad range of stakeholders directly and indirectly associated with the case studies.

While the scope – and therefore the data analysed - was relatively narrow, some key messages and themes were apparent that have led to a useful set of recommendations, which should continue to enhance SU delivery and impact. Furthermore, lessons from the assessment itself will be useful for future AQAs. For example, SU’s direct engagement with the National Security Strategy and Implementation Groups (NSSIGs) has not been considered in any depth because this governance structure was developed after FY2017/18, and so this is an area that should be researched further, perhaps in future AQAs.

### **Outcome 1: Policy into delivery**

It is very apparent from the case studies and interviews that across HMG, SU is widely respected for its professional competence, technical knowledge and ability to build relationships and trust. For example, SU staff have been key in bringing together Departments with multiple objectives at a senior policy level.

However, one of the key themes explored was how SU interacts within the broader HMG conflict and stabilisation architecture. It was clear that, as previously identified in the SU Review of 2017, there needs to be improvement in SU structural and procedural links to wider HMG. There is limited and inconsistent understanding of the SU “offer” and how, when and why to engage SU expertise. That said, there are tangible signs of improvement: SU links into the new NSSIG structure and workplans are a positive step, and SU is developing a communications strategy to address some of the challenges identified in the SU Review of 2017. Nevertheless, this point about cross-HMG engagement came up during many of the interviews conducted for this assessment; HMG departmental staff that have worked alongside SU in the past gave positive feedback on SU activity but those without these experiences are often unaware of SU capabilities or how to engage effectively with SU.

This point about engagement is demonstrated by the variety of ways in which HMG uses SU to provide a challenge function for conflict and stabilisation activity. In line with the Chilcot report, SU has positioned itself to provide a challenge function to HMG but this has, in some instances, led to a perception that SU is more focused on challenge than collaboration to support better delivery. Early engagement with SU and a clear understanding of SU roles and capabilities would likely resolve this perception issue. SU corporate intention is to engage early to ensure a collaborative approach, but this can only happen if HMG Departments embrace this approach.

The National School of Government International (NSGI), which sits on the SU platform, suffers from similar issues. The case study demonstrated that NSGI is highly rated by stakeholders that engage substantively with the team but that NSGI is relatively unknown to those who have not worked directly with it before. As

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mentioned above, SU does have a communication plan in development (that includes NSGI), which should address some of these issues if well implemented.

Realising opportunities and ensuring SU delivers to its maximum potential will require operationalising the recommendations from the SU Review of 2017 both internally and across HMG. A key outcome of the review is that SU is now well-integrated into National Security Council (NSC) and NSSIG structures, which builds on the SU position as a champion of the 'integrated approach'. SU is now well-positioned to work alongside the Cabinet Office to develop thought leadership surrounding Fusion Doctrine.

Across Outcome 1, the assessment found that SU products are high quality and well-regarded, and the case studies demonstrated that SU has had significant impact in the following areas:

- Technical advice provided by core staff (SU and NSGI) is high quality, demonstrated by thematic expertise in gender (for the gender audit case study), by regional focal points to priority countries and regions, such as Somalia and Western Balkans, and targeted programming support to the Ukraine-NATO PDP by NSGI. Best practice should be distilled to ensure consistent delivery across all the priority countries and emphasis should be placed on ensuring posts are filled.
- DCEs are seen by key stakeholders as a vital resource who add value by providing high quality expertise. It is apparent that a review of SU relationship with DCEs could further enhance their utility with feedback loops, contributing to thought leadership, greater access to cross HMG networks and access to wider SU resources.
- The demand for JACS is increasing and now is becoming accepted best practice at strategic planning levels. The process of bringing departments together to produce the analysis is as important as the product and SU is a key interlocuter.

### **Outcome 2: Strengthening international partnerships**

This is a new outcome for FY2017/18 but SU has moved emphasis from facilitating deployment of secondees into multilateral organisations to engaging with policy leads and providing direct policy support to priority agendas within the multilateral system. SU has already been able to demonstrate influence in a number of areas including policy inputs to the development of stabilisation doctrine within the EU and through the establishment of working groups with bilateral partners. The SU Multilateral Engagement Adviser has proved to be a key post, but one that is stretched if expected to cover the variety of multinational organisations including EU, UN and AU as well as Quadrilateral Group, and bilateral relationships with Germany, France, the US and other nations. This post, and the influence agenda, is made more important with the approach of Brexit.

There is a clear resourcing issue for SU under this outcome but there may be avenues across Government to relieve this pressure. Other Government Departments, especially the FCO, have secondees in the EU, UN and other organisations in key positions. It can be difficult to coordinate these posts to ensure that they both have the support they need from HMG and are well-positioned to deliver current UK policy agendas. SU posts in the EU and the UN, that are jointly funded with other HMG Departments, would enable enhanced delivery from individuals for their own departments while allowing SU to concurrently promote stabilisation agendas and relationships.

### **Outcome 3: Learning from experience**

Within the reporting period, SU completed the Elite Bargains and Political Deals project, which was well-received by SU stakeholders. SU has also added value to project delivery with the CSSF Lessons Synthesis 2017 that produced key lessons and recommendations from across the CSSF portfolio. While this and similar work has been championed by the Director of SU, the lessons and analytical work could benefit from wider dissemination through enabling structures such as interdepartmental IT, formal networks and media platforms. These are important considerations for the SU communications strategy.

Additionally, SU provided significant monitoring and evaluation (M&E) support to HMG, including M&E support to the Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan, advice on third-party monitoring and evaluation for CSSF programming in the MENA region and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) framework for the Joint International Counter-Terrorism Unit (JICTU). The quality of this support has been recognised, especially since SU runs the only HMG course on M&E.

Finally, support to the Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC) rests with the SU Liaison Officer and DCEs supporting various exercises. The quality and need for support is recognised and delivers several advantages: Armed Forces officers are introduced to SU and educated on stabilisation principles at key stages of their careers; relationships and trust are developed; and DCE stabilisation advisers have been demonstrably influencing US military during bilateral exercises. It is clear that this workstream supports SU objectives.

### **Capturing evidence of SU's contribution to HMG policy and practice**

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Current SU M&E processes gather data against task-based activity but are not currently set up to measure wider impact and influence across HMG or international partners. For example, uptake of advice and support is not recorded systematically, and the connections between activities and impact are often unclear. In response to the SU Review of 2017 recommendations, SU commissioned this AQA and has already established two new roles develop a more systematic measurement of the impact of SU's activities. This will go some way towards addressing these issues; SU could benefit from adopting and tailoring an adaptive MEL framework to more robustly track and analyse progress against stated objectives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The twelve recommendations set out below specifically aim to address the challenges identified through this assessment, thereby helping to maximise the potential that SU clearly has to achieve its stated outcomes.

### Ensuring a more consistent understanding across Whitehall of the SU “offer”

#### 1. *Implement an SU-wide communications strategy:*

SU is already designing a communications strategy. This assessment recommends that the strategy should be formulated around a 'business development' approach, clearly articulating the SU product and benefits, identifying its key audiences and designing the tools and tactics appropriate to reach those audiences. It should focus on two key objectives:

- Raising **awareness** of SU, its role, capabilities and place within the HMG conflict architecture;
- Communicating tangible **incentives** for Departments to engage, developing a culture that encourages instinctive collaboration with SU at an early stage.

The strategy should consider or include the following:

- A stakeholder mapping or analysis that includes the breadth of HMG, international organisations and public bodies;
- Identification of the needs and incentives that are relevant to each audience;
- Selection of appropriate tools to support clear and targeted messaging.

Crucially, implementing the communications strategy will require dedicated resources to maintain a credible communications platform as well as active engagement with other Departments to echo the SU message about its “offer”.

#### 2. *Utilise existing opportunities and SU tools more effectively:*

SU should build on the positive perceptions and engagement that currently exist through the following:

- Highlighting positive SU activity within the NSSIG workplans and communicating this effectively to stakeholders to demonstrate SU value. Positioning itself as a 'champion' of the Fusion Doctrine and developing the thought leadership in support of the Cabinet Office.
- Incorporating within briefings to senior HMG staff specific mention to SU support.
- Using regional focal points to actively promote the SU brand amongst regional stakeholders. This might be via information-gathering and information-sharing visits or delivering specific expertise.
- Recognising that SU courses are invaluable in promoting the SU brand and attendees should be briefed on all aspects of the “offer”, SU capabilities and engagement protocols.
- Enhancing the visibility of lessons and learning work, for instance with credible and active social media platforms.
- Training to DCEs and other deployable expertise (built into the existing training and briefings offered) that is specifically focused on ensuring they promote SU across HMG.
- Engaging with policy teams as early as possible, emphasising collaborative solutions, SU thought leadership, lessons learning, available expertise and cross-HMG perspectives.
- Fully exploiting SU's capacity for collating, analysing and communicating lessons learnt and becoming a hub for cross HMG analysis.
- Actively using dissemination events and senior meetings to land messages from SU analysis.

### Outcome 1: Policy into Delivery

#### 3. *Empower SU to engage more effectively and consistently across HMG:*

As well as the recommendations above regarding activity within SU, wider HMG stakeholders should be active in signposting SU support. Specifically:

- The NSC should be encouraged to re-emphasise the importance of Chilcot findings and how to make most effective use of the challenge function.
- SU should be empowered to develop and lead well-networked cross-HMG regional 'communities of practice' pertaining to stabilisation – ensuring they are viewed as an authority in this field and can promote collaborative exchange of opinion and ideas on a regular basis as best practice.

4. *Position SU thought leadership around Fusion Doctrine:*

SU is well-placed to add real value to the emerging Fusion Doctrine at NSSIG and delivery levels. SU should:

- Position itself as a 'champion' of the Fusion Doctrine, as it has for the Integrated Approach
- Develop the thought leadership behind a whole-of-government approach to conflict and stabilisation issues in support of the Cabinet Office;
- Ensure adequate senior resources to provide strategic advice as demand grows in relation to the NSC structures and processes.

5. *Expand the use and utility of JACs:*

The JACS methodology and outputs are both recognised within HMG and amongst international partners as useful. The following should be considered:

- SU liaison to NSSIG SROs should actively encourage the use of JACS at NSSIG level.
- Where appropriate, JACS should be shared with international partners, multilateral organisations and CSSF implementers (as in the case of Iraq);
- Gender Sensitivity and Conflict Sensitivity guidance should be integrated into JACS methodology as part of SU's work on gender mainstreaming across HMG.

6. *Develop a more structured approach to the existing system of focal points:*

SU should consolidate examples of best practice and protocol from the regional focal points model. This should include the design of a clear Terms of Reference and 'ways of working' for SU staff acting as focal points. Terms of Reference should consider:

- Consistent dialogue with stakeholders across HMG in-country and in Whitehall, as well as external actors.
- Linkages to lessons learned and analysis teams
- Support to (or convening of) a 'community of practice' network
- Information-gathering and information-sharing country visits
- Active support to DCEs that would include:
  - Ensuring DCEs have access to SU resources
  - Managing active feedback loops so DCE lessons and information are passed back to SU and cross HMG as appropriate.
  - Provision of advice (and where required, challenge) at the right stage
  - Identification of opportunities to bring HMG policy or programming together
  - Provision of a back-up professional 'go to' resource for context-aware stabilisation advice.

7. *Fully exploit the potential of deployed expertise:*

Deployable expertise is very well-received and seen as a real value-add of SU. However more could be done to maximise their impact in support of SU objectives. SU should engage regularly with long term DCEs, secondees and deployees more effectively by:

- Ensuring feedback loops on lessons learned and current wider activity at their post;
- Assisting them to provide a service that is more than the individual activity/intervention and instead offers access to SU lessons, expertise and wider HMG networks, thereby providing greater access to cross-HMG fusion opportunities;
- Supporting them to promote SU thought leadership and UK stabilisation doctrine, especially for those in multilateral posts;
- Routinely integrating them into lesson learning mechanisms.

**Outcome 2: Strengthening international partnerships**

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8. *Dedicate more resources to Outcome 2 and work with other HMG Departments to maximise SU potential under this workstream:*
    - Key government departments should contribute to creating two SU posts that act as UK stabilisation and engagement hubs or focal-points for UN and EU partners. The focal points should provide professional and technical support to their respective partner organisation and HMG colleagues, enhance UK networks and recognise (and exploit) wider opportunities for HMG.
    - SU should be formally empowered to work closely with HMG policy lead teams in respect of stabilisation secondees to multilateral organisations (EU, OSCE, UN, etc), thereby helping ensure that this valuable resource is being used optimally to further HMG interests and promote UK stabilisation agendas. As described above, TORs would assist in developing a stronger relationship management approach. Sustained SU engagement with policy teams is necessary while secondees are in post, which requires additional time and management commitment to link the operational and intellectual elements of SU is a vital investment.

### **Outcome 3: Learning from experience**

9. *Further develop SU lessons, analysis and thought leadership:*

The products developed by the SU lessons team have demonstrated reach and use. This could be expanded further with better understanding across HMG, communications and use on current issues.

- The SU lessons team should be presented as a key HMG thought leader on **current** stabilisation activity (not purely as a historical or retrospective service). The Elite Bargains work and the Raqqa stabilisation analysis are good examples;
- The SU lessons team must be fully integrated into the communications strategy, including supporting SU media platforms that will reach an informed audience;
- SU should actively target policy owners and programming teams to ensure the lessons and analysis teams work alongside those currently delivering policy;
- Senior meetings should continue to be used to promote SU analysis on key issues relevant to the audience;
- The SU lessons team and SU senior leadership should proactively seek out opportunities for exchange of lessons both within HMG and wider.

10. *Expand the SU training offer:*

SU courses are widely respected and sought after. This appetite should be acknowledged and exploited. They are key for expanding the SU network as well as educating HMG on delivering better impact.

- SU should consider expanding delivery of SU courses to HMG to meet demand. This will have resource implications;
- To increase funding, and influence key allies SU should consider opening courses to other nations.

11. *Provide continued SU support to JSCSC:*

SU consistent support to JSCSC is valued, and work under this not only educates but also influences MoD (and bilateral partners). This should be maintained through the following:

- Retain a SU Liaison Officer at JSCSC;
- Ensure DCE support is of a high standard and at sufficient levels to influence MoD key thinkers.

### **Capturing evidence of SU's contribution to HMG policy and practice**

12. *Further develop robust MEL systems to better capture evidence of SU's contribution to HMG policy and practice:*

- Adopt and tailor an adaptive MEL framework to:
  - Articulate a clear theory of change by developing a baseline and description of intended impact for each intervention or activity to make it clear how work feeds into overarching SU objectives;
  - Focus more on uptake and (secondary) reach of outputs in addition to quantity and quality;
  - Set some intermediate outcomes, which will help SU to define pathways towards achievement of outcomes;

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- Situate case studies within the broader context and help SU staff explicitly reference and evidence how they support the achievement of SU objectives.
  - Learn lessons from the Measuring Political Access and Influence methodology, which can be done as part of the Iraq team's plans for piloting this methodology;
  - Incentivise HMG programming to build into project reporting templates reference to SU consultation and advice, which will secure guaranteed feedback loops for SU.