

NAVIGATIONAL ASSISTANCE IN VTS - SERVICE OR PROCEDURE?

Confusion over the nature of navigational assistance services is unhelpful to both VTS operators and Masters alike. Time for a change?

Commodore Barry Goldman CBE, FNI Royal Navy (Rtd)

The mandate for the provision of Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) is set out in IMO Resolution A.857(20) of Nov 1997. VTS was in a hugely transformational stage at that time and the IMO was understandably cautious in what it was, and was not, prepared to support in the resolution. The document therefore reflects the tensions between those seeking to clarify what a VTS can provide and those fearing that port authorities might look to explore how technological advances could be used to reduce or replace pilotage services.

VTS and pilotage are complementary services that work together in harmony in the best interests of navigational safety, efficiency and protection of the environment. Where VTS is considered to be in competition with pilotage, this will inevitably be to the detriment of both VTS and pilotage.

Types of service

The existing IMO Resolution promotes three types of vessel traffic services:

- ⤴ Information Service (INS);
- ⤴ Traffic Organisation Service (TOS);
- ⤴ Navigational Assistance Service (NAS).

There is much confusion over what is to be expected from these services, not only by the mariner as the recipient of VTS, but also amongst many of the port authorities who are delivering VTS. In an attempt to clarify service provision, IALA issued Guideline 1089 in 2012¹ which included the extract shown in the box (also published in the IALA VTS Manual 2012):

3.1 Provision and Declaration of Services

An Information Service (INS) is the fundamental type of service within VTS. It should be formally declared and provided as a service by all VTS. When a VTS Authority organises and manages traffic within its VTS area as part of its function, then it would normally also declare the provision of a Traffic Organization Service (TOS).

A VTS would normally be expected to respond to situations where a vessel is observed, or otherwise deemed, by the VTS to be in need of navigational assistance, using appropriate procedures. The VTS would also normally be expected to respond to requests from a vessel that is in need of navigational assistance. Typical examples include but are not limited to equipment failure or incapacitation of a key member of the bridge team; this may be limited to getting the vessel to the nearest place of safety.

It, therefore, follows that a VTS Authority should declare a Navigational Assistance Service (NAS) in addition to an Information Service (INS) or Traffic Organization Service (TOS) and that VTS personnel should be appropriately trained. Where the delivery of NAS is subject to special conditions or additional capabilities/requirements relating to a specific VTS area, these should be clearly promulgated in the appropriate publications.

Notwithstanding this guidance, there are several VTS authorities which clearly organise and manage traffic, yet only formally declare an Information Service. Of greater concern, there is a much more significant number of VTS Authorities who are not following the IALA guidance and do not declare a Navigational Assistance Service. The reason for this is unclear, but appears to lie in the interpretation and understanding of the arguably cautious language of the IMO Resolution, perhaps also with an associated fear of liability.

The very limited references in case law and incident reviews tend to suggest that greater liability and criticism is likely to be levelled at a VTS operator who fails to take any action at all than at the one who takes action even where better alternatives may have been available. It is, therefore, of vital importance that not only does the mariner know what he might expect of a VTS, but that VTS operators are clear on what they are authorised to do. The existing confusion over the types of service a VTS might provide is an unhealthy basis on which to continue.

Information Service and Traffic Organisation Service

There is really little reason for there to be confusion over the provision of INS and TOS. As defined, an INS provides basic and essential information on which the master will make his own on-board navigational decisions. In a TOS, the VTS Centre will additionally manage and organise traffic ‘to provide for the safe and efficient movement of vessel traffic within the VTS area’. In terms of service provision, this is incremental. Therefore, a VTS providing a TOS would always provide an INS as well. The IMO Resolution goes on to suggest that a port or harbour would normally provide a TOS, whereas a Coastal VTS, whose area of service may include international waters, such as in the Dover or Malacca straits, may be limited to an INS. The need for a VTS will have been determined by risk assessment. For a small harbour with a straightforward navigational approach and low traffic levels an INS might suffice. However, if risk assessment has determined that a VTS is needed, then it is more likely that a TOS will also be required.

Navigation Assistance Service

Of much greater concern is the confusion over the provision of NAS and the declaration - or lack of it - in many ports. There is a common misconception that NAS equates to 'remote' or 'shore-based' pilotage. This is what IALA firmly considers NAS **not** to be; it could also explain the reluctance of some VTS Authorities to declare it. Technology may well be driving towards the ability to provide greater guidance from ashore, and advocates have argued for greater shore-based guidance in notable papers such as Hadley 1999² and Betz 2015³. However, this is a separate issue that merely serves to confuse in the context of the delivery of navigational assistance (no capitalisation) by a VTS as currently recognised by IMO and IALA.

The basics of the delivery of a NAS are set out in the IALA Guideline¹. I would confidently anticipate few VTS Authorities would expect one of their VTS Operators to watch a vessel heading towards danger without intervening simply because the VTS was not authorised to provide a NAS. There is, perhaps, less certainty over how a VTS Operator might act in the event that a vessel had a breakdown of key navigational aids in an approach channel and the Master requested assistance. (Of note, the technique of warning vessels of impending dangers and guiding a ship to a place of safety such as an intermediate anchorage is part of the Guideline¹ and should form part of V103/1 VTS Operator training).

Pilotage and 'remote' pilotage

At a more complex level, there are at least two UK ports that have internal procedures between VTS and the embarked pilot, where VTS gives a countdown of distances to specific critical turns. This would seem to be an entirely acceptable port-specific, locally endorsed, navigational assistance procedure within both the letter and spirit of IMO recommendation and IALA guidelines; to be safe and effective, the vessel's Master does not necessarily require any notification prior to the pilot's embarkation. The line is clearly crossed when a pilot offers to guide a ship remotely from a shore station, when the ship is already in pilotage waters and normally subject to pilotage, to a position where a pilot may be embarked - for reasons of, say, inclement weather. This is **not** a VTS procedure. In the two instances in Europe of which I am aware where such remote pilotage is authorised, the procedure is only formalised through the pilotage acts of the countries concerned and not through any IALA recognised procedure for delivery by VTS operators. It is, perhaps, the fear that these two quite well-known examples of remote pilotage will be extended to other ports that gave rise to the drafting of the vague and highly confusing statement relating to "result-oriented instructions" in IMO Recommendation A.857 (20). I have myself witnessed the over-prescriptive interpretation of this paragraph resulting in VTS Operators becoming completely tongue-tied in trying to provide advice, warnings or recommendations to a vessel standing into danger.

Expected intervention

Intervention by a VTS when a vessel is observed standing into danger or in response to a request for navigational assistance within a VTS Area is a capability identified in the IMO Resolution and IALA Recommendations/Guidelines. In this situation a ship's Master might quite reasonably expect such warning or assistance. Generic techniques for the provision of navigational assistance are part of a VTS Operator's general V103/1 training and certification provided by an accredited marine academy. The development of these generic techniques into specific local requirements and procedures forms part of a Port or VTS Authority's V103/3 VTS on-the-Job training and local certification process.

Of all the VTS techniques and procedures, the delivery of navigational assistance demands the closest consideration of how it is applied, authorised and delivered in the port-specific environment. Recognition and proper promulgation of the types of service being delivered will give greater clarity to VTS Operators on what they are empowered to do. Ports that do not currently offer a NAS might consider reviewing the services that their VTS provides in the light of current IMO and IALA doctrine.

Increasing clarity

The lack of consistency between ports in service declaration is evidence that the current terminology gives rise to confusion between a 'Navigation Assistance Service' as a VTS procedure providing navigational assistance as defined and recognised by IALA, and a 'Remote Pilotage Service' as a pilotage service providing navigational assistance as locally authorised by national pilotage regulations. Looking to the future, this confusion could be much more elegantly overcome by removing the term Navigation Assistance Service from the IMO Recommendation on VTS as a type of service altogether leaving 'Traffic Organisation Service' and 'Information Service' as the two main types of service that a VTS Authority might provide. The provision of navigational assistance (again, no capitals) *at the request of a vessel or by the VTS when deemed necessary* should still be recognised within IMO and IALA doctrine, but simply as a VTS technique or procedure that any VTS Centre should be prepared to deliver under such circumstances. Redefining navigational assistance in the IMO Resolution should require that training in navigational assistance continues to be given to all VTS Operators, but that it is a 'procedure' rather than a 'service'.

IALA has identified that IMO Recommendation A.857 (20) is in urgent need of amendment and has set out a roadmap towards an update to be presented to IMO⁴. This includes recognition that *'The types of services need to be more clearly defined as they currently are a source for continuous debate'*. A redraft offers a timely and golden opportunity to remove NAS as a VTS 'Service', thus simplifying service provision and removing the current terminological confusion over NAS in the minds of many mariners, VTS Operators, VTS Authorities and even Competent Authorities.

Recognising the resistance to change, should it be determined that NAS is to remain in the VTS lexicon as a type of service, then the principles above still apply - but NAS should only exist as a 'service' in the very few instances where it is **pre-planned** (e.g. a countdown to a turn), leaving the delivery of navigational assistance as a 'procedure' to relate to all remaining unplanned events. This would be a compromise and, arguably an unnecessary one, that would still not fully address the existing potential for confusion and misinterpretation.

The International Harbour Masters' Association (IHMA) will be presenting a proposal for IALA's VTS Committee in March. The author would welcome any comment to inform further discussion at subsequent meetings and in the development of the proposal being prepared for the broader update to IMO Resolution A.857(20).

Note to Editor:

After 36 years in the Royal Navy as a Specialist Navigator, Barry Goldman assumed the role of VTS Manager with the Port of London (2001 – 2012) and then Harbour Master for Jersey Harbours (2012 – 2014). He carried out representational roles for UKMPG and IHMA on UK, EU and IALA committees and specifically the IALA VTS Committee chairing the Operations Working Group for much of his 10 years in post with the Port of London.

1 IALA Guideline 1089 – Provision of Vessel Traffic Services (INS, TOS & NAS) - December 2012

2 The Journal of Navigation Vol 52 "Issues in Remote Pilotage" – Hadley 1999

3 "Emerging Technology and Maritime Piloting, the technology is here; how should we utilise it? - JM Betz 2015

4 IALA VTS STRATEGY PAPER Addressing the delivery of VTS in a rapidly changing world - May 2015