

# New IMO VTS Guidelines herald important changes

IMO has recently published Resolution A.1158(32) – Guidelines for Vessel Traffic Services, providing improvement and rationalisation of the previous VTS resolution.

---

**Commodore Barry Goldman** CBE, FNI RN (Rtd)  
**Neil Trainor** Principal Advisor VTS, AMSA

---

IMO's new IMO Resolution A.1158(32) – *Guidelines for Vessel Traffic Services* sets out the key policy objectives of Vessel Traffic Services (VTS), simplifying and standardising much of the previous version. It marks a considerable change in method and approach over the previous version, which was often confusing and sometimes contradictory. The result is a much better structured resolution, which has been reduced from 22 pages to just seven. The key points are much more logically presented and should, therefore, be more understandable and less open to misinterpretation. The new resolution will make life easier for both the providers and the users of the service.

## Why change?

Regular readers of *Seaways* may recall an article in March 2016 advocating the need for changes to IMO Resolution A.857(20) – *Guidelines for Vessel Traffic Services* – in particular with respect to Types of Service, VTS beyond territorial seas and Result Oriented Instructions.

A subsequent article in August 2018 identified how IALA had taken the lead in developing a submission to IMO MSC99 (May 2018) proposing that the IMO resolution on VTS be updated and that this had been approved and passed to the NCSR sub-committee to take forward.

Work progressed at pace within both IALA and IMO and a new Resolution A.1158(32) with updated Guidelines for Vessel Traffic Services was adopted by the IMO Assembly on 15 December 2021.

The submission to MSC99 listed eight key areas that required review. This article identifies how these have been addressed in the new resolution and how these may be of importance to mariners and VTS providers alike.

## Role of Competent Authority/VTS Authority

The old resolution was overly prescriptive on the responsibilities of the Competent Authority and VTS Authority. It did not recognise that circumstances may differ due to international/national law, geographical characteristics, traffic density/diversity, accessibility and environmental conditions.

The new resolution is arranged in a more logical and straightforward format. A section setting out the regulatory and legal framework is followed by a specific section on the VTS responsibilities of contracting governments and competent authorities for VTS and VTS providers. This is followed by guidance to participating ships.

## Changing traditional boundaries

The submission identified that coastal states are increasingly providing VTS beyond territorial seas as a means to ensure the safety, security and efficiency of navigation and the protection of the marine environment in a domain with increasingly diverse utilisation of space.

It also noted that SOLAS regulation V/12 (Safety of Navigation) states that VTS may only be made mandatory within territorial seas.

The old resolution was silent on the many ways that a VTS might contribute to the safety of vessel traffic and the protection of the environment beyond territorial seas. To address requests for clarification on this issue, IALA had published further guidance.

The new resolution reflects the principles set out in the IALA guidance (now withdrawn) and recognises the establishment of VTS beyond territorial seas:

- In association with IMO adopted ships' routing systems or mandatory ship reporting systems, or
- To provide information and advice on the basis of voluntary participation.



## VTS and future developments

The old resolution did not provide a framework to accommodate new trends, such as the development, adoption and implementation of Maritime Service Portfolios, e-navigation and other evolving instruments facilitating safe, secure and efficient maritime traffic and trade.

The new resolution places a responsibility on contracting governments to take account of future technical and other developments recognised by IMO relating to VTS. It encourages VTS providers to make use of automated reporting where possible. IALA is already working to assess future VTS needs, with specific reference to the impact of e-Navigation and MASS on VTS operations.

## Types of service (INS, TOS and NAS)

This is the one area where mariners should note an important change to address these issues.

The 'types of service' described in the old resolution – Information Service, Traffic Organization Service and Navigational Assistance Service – were subjective and open to broad interpretation and debate. This caused confusion to stakeholders, particularly Masters of vessels navigating in different VTS areas, and raised concerns that services were not being declared or delivered globally in a consistent manner.

There was significant potential for misunderstandings which could reduce the effectiveness of VTS as an important risk mitigation measure to maritime traffic. These major shortcomings were identified in the earlier *Seaways* articles.

In the new resolution, all reference to the old 'type and level of service' and the inference that the 'types of service' were optional has been removed. The misleading statement that a Coastal VTS usually only provides information has also been removed. The new resolution does not differentiate between a Port/Harbour VTS and a Coastal VTS.

In a stand-alone section identifying the 'Purpose of Vessel Traffic Services', the new resolution highlights that the purpose of a VTS is to contribute to the safety of life at sea, improve the safety and efficiency of navigation and support the protection of the environment within a VTS area by mitigating the development of unsafe situations through:

- Providing timely and relevant information on factors that may influence ship movements and assist onboard decision-making;
- Managing ship traffic to ensure the safety and efficiency of ship movements;
- Responding to developing unsafe situations.

Significantly, the elements described above to mitigate the development of unsafe situations are not optional. They are interrelated and together provide the foundation for the provision of a VTS.

In short, an entity may be *either*:

A VTS authorised by a Government or competent authority under an established legal and regulatory framework, operated with formally trained and certified VTS personnel and fulfilling the purpose of a VTS as described above, or

The new IMO Resolution A.1158(32) – Guidelines for Vessel Traffic Services – was adopted 15 December 2021 and published February 2022.

Associated IALA VTS Manual, Recommendations, Guidelines and Brochures have been aligned with the new resolution and were published February 2022. Particular note should be taken of the updated guideline G1089 – Provision of a VTS, which has been extensively updated to remove confusion about the purpose and nature of the service.

The new resolution can be found at:

<https://bit.ly/3qcP30W>

It is available for everyone to read, but you will need to create an account with the IMO before you can view it if you do not already have one.

A Local Port Service (LPS), providing only information and staffed by personnel who may not be formally trained in VTS procedures.

The degree of interaction and engagement by a VTS may vary depending on the risks in a particular area and the measures required to reduce them. The adoption of IALA standards and guidance should ensure that the delivery of VTS is harmonised.

## Result-oriented instructions

The guidance provided in the old resolution that 'instructions should be result-oriented only' was causing confusion and was open to differing interpretation – an issue outlined in the earlier *Seaways* articles. This uncertainty made it difficult to reach agreement on training guidance. More significantly, there was clear evidence that some VTS operators felt severely restricted in their ability to provide navigational assistance to vessels standing into danger.

The new resolution has removed all reference to this misleading statement. Guidance is limited to setting out the basic principle that nothing in the resolution changes the ultimate responsibility of the Master for all aspects of the operation of the ship, including the responsibility for safe navigation. The new resolution places the emphasis on the need for VTS communications to be timely, clear, concise and unambiguous and gives recognition to IALA documentation where detailed guidance such as that on VTS communications should more properly reside. IALA has already updated its guidance on VTS communications and the reissued guideline G1132 – *VTS Voice Communications and Phraseology* – now contains a final section listing specific phrases that are particularly relevant to VTS operations. This addresses the need for harmonisation of VTS communications.

## VTS qualifications, training and certification

Half of the old resolution was devoted to detailed training guidance, which was adopted in the absence of any other authoritative guidance. IALA has subsequently refined, developed and expanded its guidance on qualification and certification over a range of levels. As a result, the structure and terminology used in the old resolution was either in conflict with, or constraining, the necessary continued development of modern IALA training recommendations, guidelines and model courses.

The new resolution has one short section stating the need for appropriate qualifications and training, leaving the detail for IALA to pick up in its training documentation and model courses.

## Recognition of IALA Standards relating to VTS

The old resolution gave very little recognition to IALA; it only made reference to the IALA VTS Manual and did not refer to the suite of IALA documents relating to VTS which are now available.

The new resolution formally notes the contribution of IALA to the development of internationally harmonised guidance for VTS. It concludes by recognising IALA documentation and encouraging

Contracting Governments to take into account IALA standards and associated recommendations, guidelines and model courses.



### Administrative amendments

The old resolution referred to a number of instruments which are now incorrect, obsolete or no longer in place. The submission identified that these needed updating, and that the document would benefit from overall rationalisation and restructuring.

The new resolution is intentionally high-level, setting out the key policy objectives of VTS. All detail has been left for IALA to develop within this guidance. The result is a much better structured resolution, which has been reduced from 22 pages to a mere seven pages. These are much more logically presented and should, therefore, be more understandable and less open to misinterpretation.

### The new guidance

Following the publication of IMO Resolution A.1158(32) IALA has also updated its VTS documentation to ensure alignment with the new resolution; updated documents can be downloaded from the IALA website. While most of these updates simply align text and quotes to ensure that they remain current, three IALA guidelines have been more extensively updated to reflect the new resolution. These will be of relevance to those requiring further detail:

- G1089 – *Provision of a VTS* – extensively updated to reflect the change associated with removal of ‘types of service’ and clarification on the ‘purpose of VTS’.
- G1132 – *VTS Voice Communications and Phraseology* – new section with standardised and harmonised operational phrases.
- G1141 – *Operational Procedures for Delivering VTS* – updated to align with the new resolution and the amendments to the two guidelines above.

This is a significant watershed moment for VTS, moving to a form that is more logical and straightforward. It should be a welcome improvement for mariners on the receiving end of the service. 🌐

Commodore Barry Goldman CBE, FNI Royal Navy (Rtd) is a former IHMA representative on the IALA VTS Committee

Neil Trainor is Principal Advisor Vessel Traffic Services at the Australian Maritime Safety Agency (AMSA) and former Vice Chair of the IALA VTS Committee

**OUT NOW**

## Orals Prep Series 1

# Statutory Certificates, Documents and Surveys

Designed for repeated self-testing, this Q&A-based book is an essential guide for students and seafarers preparing for their STCW oral examination. This book covers essential topics to help you build confidence in preparing decisive answers for STCW oral examination.

**£15**



Order online at [shop.witberbys.com](https://shop.witberbys.com)

**WITHERBYS**