

**Police Shared Services Study for the Pioneer
Valley Planning Commission:
Towns of Blandford and Chester,
Massachusetts**

Project Report

December 19, 2018



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Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
Deputy Director for Operations
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Dear Mr. Mazik:

We are pleased to present this Project Report regarding opportunities for shared police services in the Towns of Blandford and Chester to the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.

This report presents several options for discussion and consideration by the Towns and we hope they will serve as a catalyst for discussion and intentional decision making. Recommendations are intended to help both towns should they choose to change the service delivery model. They also provide operational enhancements should the Towns choose to stay with their current service delivery model.

We look forward to working with you and representatives from the Towns, and we remain available to discuss any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Julia D. Novak'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Julia D. Novak
President

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Executive Summary

The Towns of Blandford and Chester face similar challenges: finding innovative ways to provide services to their residents in the face of limited financial resources and changing demographics. Like many of their neighboring communities, they have a limited commercial tax base, an aging population, and little opportunities for growth. The Towns have taken leadership roles in exploring intermunicipal collaboration through the Hilltown Collaborative, and obtained funding through the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission to conduct this study of opportunities for shared police services.

Consolidation of police departments is a challenging area that is often studied and seldom pursued. Blandford and Chester, however, are uniquely positioned to succeed in merging some or all of their police services should they wish to pursue that direction. Both have part-time police departments that work limited schedules, generally providing less than 25 hours of patrol per week, with coverage provided during other hours by the Massachusetts State Police, a situation that allows for considerable flexibility in structuring a department. Both employ the same part-time Chief of Police, who is familiar with the characteristics of each town. Blandford's Police Department currently has no other employees, leaving it in a position to rebuild from the ground up. Chester officers have been periodically patrolling Blandford during recent months in the absence of regularly scheduled Blandford patrols, and have begun to develop mutual familiarity with the Town and its residents. Many of the obstacles that often complicate consolidation efforts, such as the potential elimination of supervisory positions, do not exist. There is also a window for funding in early 2019 under the Commonwealth's Efficiency and Regionalization Grant program that could defray many of the potential startup costs associated with creating a merged police department.

The recommendations in this report provide the Towns with several options for shared police services. The first option includes three procedural alternatives for creation of a single consolidated police department through the Regional Police District Law, through special legislative act, or by means of an intermunicipal agreement. The second option is a contract model, under which one town enters into a negotiated agreement with the other to provide a specific level of police service for a set fee. The third is to fully or partially merge administrative functions, reducing the costly overhead associated with modern policing. Finally, the communities may consider sharing the services of a single Chief of Police, an arrangement that is effectively in place on an interim basis.

The report also notes a series of operational issues that should be addressed, regardless of the overall direction chosen by the Towns, to either prepare for consolidation or to enhance their individual operations. They include converting both departments to the same dispatch provider; obtaining radio equipment for communication on the same frequency, as well as enhancement of coverage in areas with limited reception; implementing a joint records management system; development of policies and procedures; and enhancing data collection to assist in scheduling patrol shifts during times of peak activity and to support future planning efforts. A preliminary list of items to be considered in the consolidation process is provided, ranging from basic tasks such as the design of uniforms and vehicle markings to more complex issues such as the standardization of salary rates and the development of processes for the allocation of ongoing operating costs; developing service level expectations for each community; and implementing vehicle replacement plans. A preliminary estimate of major costs that are likely to be incurred in implementation of a shared services model is provided.

The nature of the two departments – small, part-time agencies with limited workload data – reduces the potential for a data driven analysis of shared services. However, it does present the Towns with a great deal of flexibility in choosing the level of service and the structure that best addresses their needs. They are well-positioned to pursue any of the shared services options that have been presented. The principal factor in the success of a shared services model is public support. Consolidation of police services is a major step, and without the support of elected officials and the public, the likelihood of its long-term success is limited. The options presented in this study provide the Towns with an opportunity to design a program that meets their needs, reflects their values, ensures that both communities are treated equitably, and includes provisions for termination of the arrangement if expectations are not met.

The following table summarizes the recommendations included in the report.

Table 1: Summary of Recommendations

#	Recommendation
1	Adopt a process for maintaining and regularly reporting mutual aid responses by type for each town.
2	Further evaluate consolidation of the Blandford and Chester Police Departments and potential operating costs.
3	As an alternative to regionalization, engage in further discussions regarding contracted services.
4	Consider the benefits of collaboration or contracting of administrative oversight as a more cost-effective approach to meeting administrative obligations.
5	Consider the benefits of sharing the services of a Chief of Police.

Introduction

One of the highest priorities of local government is its responsibility for public safety: ensuring that its residents feel safe within their communities and that an appropriate structure is in place to prevent and deter crime; to respond to calls for service; to protect life and property and the rights of all individuals; to ensure a quality of life that reflects the wishes of the community; and to respond to natural or manmade disasters. All of this must be done within the context of limited municipal budgets, cognizant of the increasing financial pressure faced at every level of government.

Each community has unique policing needs. Throughout the United States, there are state and large metropolitan agencies; sheriff and countywide police departments; and most commonly, small municipal police departments, many of which operate on a part-time basis. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, there are 261 full-time law enforcement agencies with 15,490 employees, of which 13,008 are sworn officers, serving a population of 6,329,307. Nationwide, 13,217 agencies employ 933,142, including 652,936 sworn officers.¹

One of the biggest challenges for local governments is establishing the correct level of police service for their communities. It is critical in the current fiscal climate that municipal officials look at all options to ensure that public safety services are delivered in the most effective and fiscally sustainable manner, including the exploration of shared municipal services.

The Towns of Blandford and Chester share many characteristics. They are similar in population and are primarily rural and residential in character, with no significant commercial tax base. Like many neighboring towns in the area, commonly referred to as “the Hilltowns,” they are facing demographic changes, with an aging population and limited growth, and have recognized the importance of exploring innovative ways to ensure the delivery of government services, including policing, in an efficient and fiscally responsible manner.

The Towns requested funding from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) to seek consultant services to analyze options for shared police services. The PVPC is the regional planning body for the Pioneer Valley region, which encompasses 43 cities and towns in the Hampden and Hampshire County areas of Massachusetts. It is the primary agency responsible for increasing communication, cooperation, and coordination among all levels of government as well as the private business and civic sectors in order to benefit the Pioneer Valley region and to improve its residents' quality of life.

The PVPC retained The Novak Consulting Group (TNCG) to perform this study utilizing funding from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Direct Local Technical Assistance program. TNCG has been tasked with reviewing the operations of both police departments to assess potential benefits or obstacles associated with consolidation or sharing of personnel, facilities, or equipment.

To conduct this analysis, TNCG reviewed data regarding calls for service, staffing, scheduling, and budgets from both police departments. TNCG also conducted field work, meeting with the Chief of Police, Town Administrators, and elected officials, as well as visiting the Towns' police facilities and touring both towns.

These efforts have enabled TNCG to develop a preliminary understanding of the areas served by the two police departments, the desired levels of service from the perspectives of both staff and elected

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States 2016*, Table 26.

officials, the financial constraints within which the Towns operate, and the challenges faced by the departments. The result is several recommendations aimed at providing both municipalities with options for full or partial consolidation of their police departments or sharing of services.

Summary of Current Operations

The Towns of Blandford and Chester are abutting communities located in Hampden County. Intermunicipal cooperation in the area has a lengthy history dating back to 1949, when the concept of a regional high school was first discussed. The Gateway Regional School District, which officially began with the opening of a regional high school on September 4, 1963, now operates two elementary schools, a middle school, a junior high school, and a high school serving the needs of approximately one thousand students in seven towns: Huntington, Russell, Blandford, Chester, Worthington, Montgomery, and Middlefield. Worthington withdrew from the school district in 2014 to open its own elementary school and affiliate with the Hampshire Regional School District. The remaining six towns formed the Hilltown Collaborative, with the goal of advocating for local and regional issues involving education, the economy, and sustainability, and to facilitate open discussion and collaboration among the six towns and the regional school district.

Profiles of each community and the current state of police operations are summarized below.

Town of Blandford

The Town of Blandford was settled in 1735 and incorporated in 1741. It operates under the open town meeting form of government, with a three-member Board of Selectmen. Under this form of government, an annual Town Meeting, open to all residents, is essentially the legislative body for the Town, and decides three major items:

- It sets the salaries of elected officials.
- It votes to appropriate money for Town operations.
- It votes on the Town's local statutes.

All Town residents are eligible to vote on all matters. The Board of Selectmen consists of elected officials who serve as the Town's executive officers. They may call Town meetings, supervise Town employees, and may appoint a Town Administrator to administer Town operations under their supervision.²

The total area of the Town of Blandford is 53.4 square miles, of which 51.6 square miles is land. The 2010 U.S. Census cites the Town's population as 1,233, consisting of 492 housing units. Of those, 455 housing units are owner-occupied and 37 are renter-occupied units.³ Median household income is \$67,000, and per capita income is \$34,840. Approximately 4.2% of individual residents are estimated to be living below the poverty line.⁴

The Town of Blandford Police Department currently has only one employee: a part-time Chief of Police, hired in September 2018, who also serves as the part-time Chief of Police in the Town of Chester. When the Chief of ten years resigned in June 2018, the Town appointed an interim Chief. The interim Chief and the entire staff of the Department – three part-time Police Officers – resigned in July 2018. The Chester Police Department has been providing periodic patrols of Blandford during this period.

² "Citizen's Guide to Town Meetings," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Secretary of the Commonwealth, <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/cis/cistwn/twnidx.htm>

³ U.S. Census Bureau, *Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010*, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

The Police Department is housed in an office in Blandford Town Hall at 1 Russell Stage Road. The Department is equipped with three vehicles: two Ford Crown Victoria sedans and one Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV), which was recently acquired as a surplus vehicle from the Massachusetts State Police. The vehicles are stored at Town Hall.

The Police Department's operating budget for Fiscal Year 2018 is \$42,796.00. Of that, \$29,580.00 is allocated for police salaries and \$13,216.00 for expenses.

Emergency calls are dispatched by Berkshire Control, a regional dispatch center operated by the Berkshire County Sheriff's Office that serves 26 municipalities. Berkshire Control records reflect a total of 150 calls for service in 2016; 191 in 2017; and 131 for 2018 to date.⁵ Of those calls, the Blandford Police Department responded to 64 in 2016; 123 in 2017; and 20 during 2018 to date. The Massachusetts State Police responded to the remainder.

The Department is not a full-time operation. It staffs public office hours on the first and third Mondays of every month between 6:00 PM and 8:00 PM. Due to the absence of staff, no regular patrols are currently conducted. Traditionally, the Department staffed 25 to 30 hours of patrol weekly, typically in four shifts of five to eight hours. Patrol shifts were generally scheduled based on officers' availability. When no officers are assigned, response to calls for service defaults to the Massachusetts State Police.

The Department is responsible for investigation of crimes within the Town, with the exception of homicides, which are investigated by the local District Attorney.⁶ Investigations are normally assigned to a patrol officer or to the Chief of Police. The Massachusetts State Police provides forensic assistance as well as investigative support as needed. In practice, however, the Blandford Police Department only investigates those crimes to which it responds; if a State Trooper responds to a call while the Department is not in service, the State Police handle the follow-up investigation.

Town of Chester

The Town of Chester was settled in 1760 and incorporated in 1783. It also operates under the open town meeting form of government, with a three-member Board of Selectmen. The total area of the Town is 37.2 square miles, of which 36.6 square miles is land. The 2010 U.S. Census cites the Town's population as 1,337, consisting of 543 housing units. Of those, 454 housing units are owner-occupied, with 89 renter-occupied units.⁷ Median household income is \$77,917, and per capita income is \$29,842. Approximately 8.0% of individual residents are estimated to be living below the poverty line.⁸

The Town of Chester Police Department is currently staffed by seven part-time employees: one Chief of Police, one Sergeant, and five Police Officers.

The Department is housed in an office on the lower level of Chester Town Hall at 15 Middlefield Road. It is equipped with two vehicles: one unmarked SUV assigned to the Chief of Police, which is stored at the

⁵ November 27, 2018

⁶ Under Massachusetts General Law Title VI, Chapter 38, §4, the District Attorney is charged with the investigation of homicides, with the exception of certain designated cities in the Commonwealth.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010*, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

Chief's residence when not in use, and one marked SUV assigned to patrol, which is stored at the Town Highway Department. The vehicles are equipped with Mobile Digital Terminals, Automated External Defibrillators (AEDs), and Digital Vehicle Repeater Systems that strengthen radio signals to officers' portable radios when they are in buildings or areas with poor coverage.

The Police Department's operating budget for Fiscal Year 2018 is \$61,836.00, of which \$39,236.00 is for salaries. An additional \$3,600.00 in salary is specifically earmarked for training expenses and \$19,000.00 is allocated for operating expenses.

Like the Town of Blandford, the Department is not a full-time operation. It staffs public office hours on the second and fourth Mondays of every month between 6:00 PM and 8:00 PM. The Department typically staffs 25 to 30 hours of patrol weekly, usually in four shifts of five to eight hours. Patrol shifts are generally scheduled based on officers' availability. When no officers are assigned, response to calls for service defaults to the Massachusetts State Police.

As in Blandford, the Department is responsible for investigation of crimes within the Town, with the exception of homicides, which are investigated by the local District Attorney.⁹ In practice, the Chester Police Department only investigates those crimes to which it responds; if a State Trooper responds to a call while the Department is not in service, the State Police handle the follow-up investigation.

Emergency calls are dispatched by Northampton Control, a regional dispatch center operated by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts located at the Northampton State Police Barracks. It serves 14 communities in Hampden and Hampshire Counties. Northampton Control records reflect a total of 311 calls for service in 2017 and 272 for 2018 to date. Of those calls,¹⁰ the Chester Police Department's records indicate that it responded to 86 in 2017 and 60 during 2018 to date.

Massachusetts State Police

The Massachusetts State Police is the agency charged with providing police services to rural areas and towns without independent police departments, making it, by default, the agency that responds to emergencies when members of local agencies are unavailable. It also provides support services, such as crime scene processing and investigative assistance. Therefore, it is helpful to understand the agency's role and capacity.

The Towns of Blandford and Chester are served by Station B-5 of the Massachusetts State Police, also referred to as "SP Russell," which is located at 90 Westfield Road in the Town of Russell. The Russell Barracks covers 11 cities and towns in an area of 365 square miles, including 11 state highways, and is responsible for security for the Cobble Mountain and Borden Brook reservoirs, the Knightville and Littlefield dams, Westfield State University, and Barnes Airport.¹¹

The primary mission of the station is providing police services to those municipalities that do not have independent police departments or full-time coverage. As a result, the station covers most towns during

⁹ Under Massachusetts General Law Title VI, Chapter 38, §4, the District Attorney is charged with the investigation of homicides, with the exception of certain designated cities in the Commonwealth.

¹⁰ November 20, 2018

¹¹ <https://www.mass.gov/locations/state-police-russell-barracks>

the late night hours and on weekends when no other police resources are available. It also provides assistance when town police departments have incidents that are beyond their capabilities.

Station B-5 typically assigns three patrols for its coverage area. As a result, response time may be extended, depending on call volume and troopers' locations.

Hampden County Sheriff

County government has been largely abolished in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. With the exception of the southeastern portion of the Commonwealth (Bristol, Plymouth, Norfolk, Barnstable, and Dukes Counties, and certain counties that were essentially merged into coterminous city or town governments, such as Suffolk and Nantucket), for the most part, counties are descriptive geographical areas. Most functions previously performed at the County level have been assumed by local governments or by regional councils of governments. Hampden County was abolished on July 1, 1999.

Each County does, however, still have an elected Sheriff, whose jurisdiction is the County, but who is actually an employee of the Commonwealth. Although the responsibility of sheriffs' offices varies, they are primarily responsible for operating correctional facilities and for the service of process. Deputy Sheriffs are law enforcement officers, and Sheriffs often provide specialized services to assist municipal police departments, such as K9 units, dive teams, and Special Response or SWAT teams. Some have a uniform component, typically composed of volunteer Reserve Deputy Sheriffs who have completed the Reserve Intermittent Police Officer Academy and are deployed to special events or emergencies. The Sheriff's Office may be relied upon for short-term assistance in unusual circumstances. (For instance, the Hampden County Sheriff supplied Deputies to provide a patrol presence following the unexpected resignation of the members of the Blandford Police Department.) However, their primary mission is corrections, and they have limited authority to make warrantless arrests not involving breach of the peace.¹² The Sheriff's Office is not a viable alternative for meeting communities' long-term policing needs.

¹² *Commonwealth v. Baez*, 42 Mass. App. Ct. 565; MGL Part I, Title XIV, Chapter 90C, §2

Findings and Recommendations

Municipal leaders face a considerable challenge in determining the appropriate configuration and staffing level of their public safety agencies. Their goal is to see that agencies are staffed, equipped, and trained to respond to any contingency, while funding them within the locality's ability to pay, and in a way that ensures the future affordability of government services. Police services can be delivered in many forms: the 24 hour a day metropolitan police department that closely monitors its response time to calls and staffs an array of specialized units; the smaller departments that rely on larger agencies for specialized and support functions; or complete reliance on an outside agency such as the State Police to respond to calls as needed. Along that continuum are any number of models, including small part-time departments with limited deployment.

Determining an appropriate staffing level for a small rural community is particularly difficult since there are limited data points to guide the decision making process. Staffing levels are typically based on the volume of calls for service and community expectations for enforcement and service, which may be impacted by the following: traffic patterns; business versus residential concentration; population; density; socioeconomic character; daytime population increase; presence of educational, religious, medical, and cultural institutions; and planned development. However, many of those metrics, which are typically available to assess the workload and activity of larger agencies, are simply not available or relevant in a smaller community.

Therefore, in the absence of the key drivers found in larger communities such as a significant call volume or major crime issues, the initial step in analysis of a community's policing needs depends largely on the response to several questions:

- Does the community need or want its own police department, or is it willing to rely solely on an outside entity (such as the State Police)?
- What is the community's perception of its safety and its need for police services?
- Does the community need or desire around-the-clock coverage; proactive patrol; specialized programs; traffic enforcement; visible police presence; or just reactive response to emergency calls?
- What does the community consider to be an acceptable response time?
- What is the community's willingness – and fiscal capacity – to fund police operations?

It is also important to consider a fact that is sometimes overlooked: there is a sizeable administrative burden associated with the operation of a modern police department. Training, scheduling, recordkeeping, statistical analysis, updating of policies, evidence management, review of reports, legal updates, human resources administration, information technology, recruitment and retention, compliance with Freedom of Information/Open Records Law requirements, and similar tasks beyond routine patrol have continued to increase in both complexity and importance. The "back office" operation of any law enforcement agency is not insignificant, regardless of the size of the agency, and the liability that can accrue to a municipality that fields a police department without satisfactorily addressing its administrative obligations can far outweigh the benefit provided by a token police presence.

Up to this point, both Blandford and Chester have determined that their interests are best served by part-time Police Departments.

The Towns are quite similar, as illustrated by the side-by-side comparison in the tables below.

Table 2: Statistical comparison, Police Departments, Towns of Blandford and Chester

Category	Blandford	Chester
Population	1,233	1,337
Square mileage	53.4	37.2
Population density	23.09 per sq. mi.	35.94 per sq. mi
Centerline Road Miles ¹³	88.97	67.29
Calls for Service 2017	191	311
Full-time police officers	0	0
Part-time police officers	1 (Chief) ¹⁴	7¹⁵
FT Police Officer Salary	n/a	n/a
PT Police Officer salary	\$15.00 ¹⁶	\$18.50
Collective bargaining	no	no
Civil Service	no	no
Annual Operating Budget	\$42,796	\$61,836
Salary portion of budget	\$29,580	\$39,236¹⁷
Expense portion of budget	\$13,216	\$19,000

Table 3: Statistical comparison, selected economic indicators, Towns of Blandford and Chester

Category	Blandford	Chester
Housing Units	492	543
Owner-occupied housing	455 units/92%	454 units/84%
Renter-occupied housing	37 units/8%	89 units/16%
Median household income	\$67,000	\$77,917
Median per capita income	\$34,840	\$29,842
% of individuals below poverty line	4.2%	8.0%
Equalized valuation	\$174,764,000	\$125,043,400

Crime statistics for 2017 maintained by the Massachusetts State Police list no crimes reported by either Blandford or Chester.¹⁸ Both Towns are primarily rural, with virtually no industrial or commercial tax base. Chester had an industrial base until the 1960s, with a granite quarry, a railroad, and several manufacturing businesses. It has transitioned into a primarily residential and farming community. The former railroad station has become a railroad museum, and in the summer months, Chester is home to the Chester Theater Company, which stages several productions annually. It is a slightly denser community. During the 1800s, Blandford was the site of several industries – notably tanneries and cheese production. During the early 1900s, a large amount of land was taken for the construction of the

¹³ Massachusetts Department of Transportation 2017 Massachusetts Road Inventory Year End Report, pages 41-42: <https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/03/19/2017-ri-ye-rpt.pdf>

¹⁴ Blandford employed one Chief of Police and three police officers until their resignation in 2018.

¹⁵ Includes five Police Officers, one Sergeant, and one Chief of Police.

¹⁶ The previous Chief of Police in Blandford was paid \$20.00 per hour.

¹⁷ An additional \$3,600 is budgeted for training.

¹⁸ <https://masscrime.chs.state.ma.us/public/View/dispview.aspx>

Borden Brook and Cobble Mountain reservoirs; about one-third of the Town's land is part of the water supply for the City of Springfield, and not subject to development. By the 1930s, Blandford was largely residential and agricultural. It is the site of Ski Blandford, a ski area that was closed during the 2017-2018 season due to a transition of ownership but is expected to reopen for the 2018-2019 season. It is also the site of the Blandford rest area on the Massachusetts Turnpike, although the Turnpike is inaccessible from the Town.

Each of the towns has a pending issue that may have long-term impact. In Chester, a license application has been filed for the opening of a marijuana production facility; however, it is expected to be purely a production facility and not engage in retail sales. Blandford faces a more significant issue: it is one of two sites being considered for construction of a new interchange on the Massachusetts Turnpike, since it is located close to the middle of one of the longest unbroken stretches of interstate highway in the country.¹⁹ Community reaction to the proposed interchange is reportedly mixed; some, particularly residents who commute, welcome easier access to the highway and its potential economic boost; others are concerned about the project's impact on the Town's quality of life.

With that background, the sections that follow review potential opportunities available to the two communities for consolidation or shared services.

Options for Intermunicipal Collaboration

The purpose of this study is to analyze the feasibility of shared police services between the Towns of Blandford and Chester. As previously indicated, there are few metrics on which to base such an analysis. The two Departments are not around-the-clock operations for which response times can be measured; aside from regular office hours, they work random hours. Neither community generates a high volume of calls for service, summonses, or arrests. Both communities have very low crime rates and appear to be perceived by their residents as safe places to live. They average less than one call a day. While the structure and adequacy of larger police departments can be assessed based on call volume, response time, or their ability to meet a specified level of coverage, such as a set number of officers on patrol 16 hours per day, the Blandford and Chester Police Departments fall into a separate category. They are part-time, rural police departments, providing local police services over and above the response provided by the State Police at a level that fits the basic needs of a rural community and the constraints of its limited budget. So it becomes important to answer the initial question: do the communities want their own Police Departments, and what is the advantage to maintaining a local Police Department?

There is no question that public safety is a core service of municipal government, and it is a costly one; in many municipalities, it is the largest cost center. Although some minor revenue streams may be associated with it, such as fines and forfeitures, policing is not a profitable enterprise. Municipalities are under no obligation to operate their own Police Departments; the Massachusetts State Police provides police coverage for rural communities. There are, however, advantages to the presence of a local police department.

The Massachusetts State Police is a highly competent agency, but its personnel have an enormous area of responsibility. The Russell Barracks covers an area of 365 square miles encompassing 11 cities and towns with a small contingent of Troopers. While Chester and Blandford benefit to an extent from their

¹⁹ <https://www.berkshireagle.com/stories/possible-new-turnpike-exit-site-narrowed-to-otis-blandford,549711>

proximity to the barracks, response time can often be lengthy. Such a large area of responsibility limits Troopers' ability to become acquainted with residents and to establish the community relationships that are so beneficial to effective policing and more achievable at the Town level. A local Police Department enables officers to become intimately familiar with the geography of their patrol area – to know where particular attention is needed, to know when things are out of place, and to know the residents. Many people have no particular need to know their police officers or other municipal employees; for them, the ideal local government plows and repairs their roads, keeps electricity on, and sends the Police, Fire Department, or ambulance when there is an emergency, without ever drawing their attention. Good policing respects that but also permits the opportunity for closer contact with those who want to know their local police. Knowledge of the community and collaborative relationships with its residents are invaluable when there is an emergency or simply in effective policing.

A local Police Department affords a municipality the opportunity to address particular needs or conditions, such as speeding; traffic complaints; school bus violations; school concerns; youth issues; or the rare crime pattern that occasionally emerges even in the safest communities – rather than competing with 11 other towns for such services. Similarly, they enable the community to deploy its own resources for special events or in emergencies, such as the aftermath of a serious weather event, natural or manmade disaster, to provide rescue and security duties. A benefit of having a part-time staff is that it broadens the personnel resources available for deployment; instead of one or two full-time officers, the Town can have five or six part-time officers who can be mobilized in emergencies, typically at less than the detail rate that would be paid to officers brought in from outside agencies. Officers are also trained in first aid and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR); when they are on patrol they are often the first responders to a medical emergency.

Local Police Departments have an administrative role in such areas as the issuance of firearms identification cards, an important function in rural areas where hunting and shooting sports are popular.

There are clearly advantages to local policing, but the decision is ultimately dependent on the will of the community.

Blandford and Chester have a history of collaboration, as do their neighboring Hilltowns. The Gateway Regional School District has existed for more than 50 years. The Hilltown Collaborative, a more recent venture, has produced an economic development assessment, and the six towns jointly hired an economic development director to manage the organization. The Towns have also completed a study of a shared finance operation. The Hilltown Community Ambulance Association provides emergency medical services to the Towns of Blandford, Chester, Huntington, Montgomery, Russell, and Worthington. There is clearly recognition in the Hilltowns of the financial realities facing local government, and there is a willingness to work collaboratively to address them.

There are particular sensitivities that can arise when considering the consolidation or regionalization of police services. Just as every community has its own unique character, police departments also have individual personalities reflective of the communities they serve. Different areas develop different styles of policing, and residents develop certain expectations of their police officers. In many cases, municipalities feel that their police departments are part of their identity. People feel strongly about knowing their police officers and, more importantly, that their officers know the communities they serve. These concerns must be taken into account in the evaluation of service sharing opportunities. However, as illustrated by the previously cited statistical comparisons, Blandford and Chester are quite

similar; they have been effectively sharing services for several months; and Blandford is essentially in a position to rebuild its Police Department from the ground up.

Several potential options are discussed below, including the consolidation of police departments; contracting for police services; combining administrative functions; and sharing the services of a police chief. As a beginning point, it is helpful to review the practice of Mutual Aid.

Mutual Aid – Formal and Informal

Mutual Aid is a recognized concept in both the police and fire services. However, the term can be misinterpreted, so it merits discussion. The towns are parties to a formal Mutual Aid agreement, which permits them to request police personnel and equipment when there is a need for assistance, pursuant to Massachusetts law.²⁰ It provides authorization for police officers to exercise police powers in the requesting jurisdiction and establishes procedures for command and control, indemnification, and reimbursement of expenses. The requesting municipality is responsible for all personnel and equipment costs associated with the mobilization, as well as indemnification of the responding municipality from any claims for civil rights violations, personal injuries, death, or property damages resulting from the Mutual Aid response.

The concept of Mutual Aid is intended for emergency mobilization of resources – large scale emergency incidents, civil disorder, officer in need of assistance, etc. – and is not intended to provide routine coverage, strictly speaking. The Mutual Aid agreement calls for reimbursement of salary and equipment expenses, language commonly intended to cover a large-scale emergency deployment.

However, most neighboring police departments routinely engage in what is best referred to as “informal mutual aid.” They back up neighboring officers, respond to priority calls when the neighboring jurisdiction is occupied, etc. This is routine in most communities, and is effectively what the Town of Chester has done during the months that Blandford has been without a police staff.

Informal mutual aid is an accepted and valuable aspect of policing, especially in an area where officers must routinely rely on members of neighboring departments for backup. However, it can become an issue when the perception arises that a municipality is taking advantage of the process by using mutual aid to cover regular operations at the expense of a neighboring jurisdiction. This does not appear to be the case; however, as needs and demands for police services increase, along with the associated costs, it is important to prevent it from becoming a point of contention.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Adopt a process for maintaining and regularly reporting mutual aid responses by type for each town.

Data regarding cross-jurisdictional response, maintained in readily retrievable format, will be helpful to inform future discussions regarding regionalization or shared services, and should be tracked closely. Moreover, it is important for Town leaders to consider not only the calls for service that were responded to by local officers, but those that were addressed through mutual aid and those handled by the Massachusetts State Police in the absence of on-duty officers. This is critical to ensuring an accurate understanding of actual service demand which in turn informs resource allocation and policy decisions regarding resource allocation.

²⁰ Chapter 40, §8G, Massachusetts General Laws

Merger Creating One Regional Police Department

The primary focus of this study is the potential merger of the Blandford and Chester Police Departments into a single regional entity. The Towns are uniquely situated to pursue a successful merger, as follows:

- Both towns employ the same police chief, and Blandford currently has no officers on staff. Nobody will lose their job in the event of a merger – an issue that is often a major obstacle in blending agencies.
- There are no civil service or collective bargaining obligations to prevent consolidation.
- The Chief's experience working in both towns provides insight into the nuances of each community that would be valuable to the transition.
- Chester officers have been routinely patrolling Blandford for several months. They have had the opportunity to become familiar with the Town, and the staff and residents have been able to become familiar with them.
- Both Departments work varied part-time schedules based largely on officers' availability. Due to the limited hours in service, most calls are actually handled by the Massachusetts State Police. Combining patrol areas should not significantly impact response time to calls. Although patrol officers would be patrolling a larger distance, assuming the previous patrol staffing levels of approximately 25 hours per week, local police would be available to patrol the area and respond to calls for double the amount of time they were previously on duty. Patrol schedules could be configured to meet particular needs and demands of each town, or to ensure that specific levels of service are provided to each.
- Management of both departments and the associated administrative duties, such as supervision, scheduling, training, recordkeeping, and procurement of equipment would be combined into a single entity.

There are costs associated with merging departments, which will be discussed later in this report. The Towns have a unique opportunity in this regard. The Commonwealth's Efficiency and Regionalization Grant program is a competitive process administered by the Division of Local Services to provide financial support for governmental entities interested in implementing regionalization and other efficiency initiatives that allow for long-term local government sustainability. Funds are available for regionalization, including shared services, joint or regional facilities, intergovernmental agreements, consolidations, mergers, and other collaborative efforts. Eligible expenses include small capital purchases or improvements that are integral to the implementation of a functional program such as equipment or software; technical assistance including consulting services, assistance in drafting contracts or other agreements; and transition or project management costs. The application period for funding will run from January 15 through February 15, 2019.

A comprehensive statutory process for the merger of Police Departments is established by Massachusetts General Law (MGL) Part I, Title VII, Chapter 41, Sections 99B to 99K, entitled the "Regional Police District Law."²¹ The statute permits "two or more contiguous towns to establish a regional district and organize a common police department to serve and protect the inhabitants of said towns." It requires a positive vote at an annual town election or town meeting on three questions:

- A. Shall the town accept the provisions of sections ninety-nine B to ninety-nine K, inclusive, of chapter forty-one of the General Laws, providing for the establishment of a regional police district, together with the town (towns) of?

²¹ <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleVII/Chapter41>

- B. Shall the police department provided for in question A be under the control and supervision of the regional police district commission and otherwise be governed by section ninety-seven of chapter forty-one of the General Laws governing local police department?
- C. Shall the police department provided for in question A be under the sole control and supervision of the chief of police appointed by the regional police district commission and otherwise be governed by section ninety-seven A of chapter forty-one of the General Laws governing local police departments?

The regional police district has all of the powers and duties normally conferred by law on police departments, as well as the power to acquire land and incur debt for construction of police facilities; to receive and disburse funds for district purposes; to assess member towns for expenses of the district; to employ a Chief of Police; and to adopt an annual operating and maintenance budget not later than December 1st.

The regional police district is overseen by a commission organized by the select boards of the member towns. Each board appoints two members of the commission for staggered terms; the commission chooses a chair and a vice-chair. It also appoints a secretary and a treasurer, who may be the same person but do not have to be members of the commission. The statute specifies a process for assessing expenses to the member towns²²:

- Fifty per cent thereof shall be assessed upon all towns in the district in the proportion which the total equalized valuation in each said town bears to the total equalized valuation in the district. When used in this section, "equalized valuation" shall mean the equalized valuation of the aggregate property in a town subject to local taxation, as most recently reported by the commissioner of revenue to the general court under the provisions of section ten C of chapter fifty-eight.
- Twenty-five per cent thereof shall be assessed upon all towns in the district in the proportion which the number of inhabitants in each said town bears to the total number of inhabitants in the district. The number of inhabitants shall be determined in accordance with the last preceding federal census.
- Twenty-five per cent thereof shall be assessed upon all towns in the district in the proportion which the total mileage of state highways and town ways in each said town, as most recently determined by the state department of highways, bears to the total mileage of state highways and town ways in the district.

The statute permits towns to revoke the provisions of the regional police district law. Upon filing of a petition signed either by the select board or by not less than five percent of the town's registered voters, the question is placed on the ballot at the next town election occurring more than 30 days after filing of the petition.

In summary, merger requires a vote by the community; the regional district is essentially a corporate body run by a board of commissioners appointed by the select boards; each town has equal representation on the board of commissioners; and it can be dissolved by vote of the community at the next election.

²² <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleVII/Chapter41/Section99I>

Although each town cedes some degree of day-to-day authority over, and responsibility for, their police department to a police commission, there are many advantages to regionalization.

A smaller department bears the same administrative burdens as its larger counterparts. The importance of keeping up with those responsibilities has been mentioned elsewhere in this analysis, as has the disproportionate expense of it.

Consolidation offers an opportunity to combine administrative tasks – training, scheduling, evidence management, etc. – into one functional area, and to combine resources in a way that under ideal circumstances provides a higher level of staffing to the combined agency and consequently an enhanced level of coverage and emergency response capacity. It also provides an opportunity to consolidate personnel and equipment. A regional police department could take many forms; at its most basic, however, by combining the 25 weekly hours of patrol typically scheduled by each Department, the communities would immediately have the opportunity to double coverage to 50 hours per week. Although it would cover a larger area, it would significantly increase the amount of time when local resources were available to both communities.

There are many reasons to support creation of a regional police department to serve both towns. Both departments are well-suited for merger, particularly since it is a rare situation that would not involve personnel or leadership changes, and an experienced Chief of Police is in place to guide the process. Consolidation and regionalization are supported by the Commonwealth, and grant funding is available that would potentially defray startup costs. A merged department could be designed that is scalable to allow for expansion into other interested Hilltown communities in the future. The Hilltown Collaborative could play a role in that process, developing interest on the part of other communities and coordinating merger efforts.

In considering consolidation of police departments, it is important that cost savings not be the primary motivation. Although the hope is that the new structure may generate savings at a future date, there are startup equipment costs and some personnel costs if staff must be added or if a department's salary structure and equipment levels must be brought into line with another department. Models based principally on cost savings tend to fail; it is important that the emphasis is on enhancing the delivery of services.

Unfortunately, closer scrutiny of the statutory formula for allocation of expenses in MGL §99I (cited above) produces an unexpected result. The legislation is intended to equitably assess costs with a formula based on proportional distribution, with 50 percent of the cost assessed proportionally based on the towns' equalized valuation; 25 percent of costs assessed proportionally based on population; and 25 percent of costs assessed proportionally based on the total mileage of roads in each town. It does not consider the existing staffing level, current budget, or police workload of the communities. As a result, if a combination of the Towns' current police budgets is used as a baseline, Blandford's annual budget of \$42,796 would change to \$57,809.18, while Chester's current budget of \$61,836 would change to \$46,822.82.

While the statute's purpose of ensuring fair allocation of costs is appropriate, and its underlying reasoning is sound, in this case it results in unanticipated consequences. Blandford and Chester are excellent candidates for consolidation and some budgetary increase should be expected in the process. Perhaps compensatory adjustments in service levels could be made to offset ongoing costs. The decision may be to proceed with consolidation based on its long-term operational and financial impacts, the possibility that it may set a pattern for other Hilltown communities, or with the expectation that costs

could equalize if additional towns joined the effort. A legislative initiative may be appropriate to make the statute more flexible. However, this is likely to be an important point for consideration by elected officials and the community, and may be difficult to surmount.

The legislature has established specific statutes regarding consolidation in several areas of governmental services. For example, regional school districts are covered by MGL Chapter 71, §14 and 15. Refuse districts fall under Chapter 40, §44 A to K; water districts under Chapter 40N; veterans districts under Chapter 115 §10; and protection of natural resources under Chapter 21A §20.

However, a potential alternative is to consolidate the departments by means of an intermunicipal agreement (IMA). Chapter 40 §4 of the Massachusetts General Law²³ permits a town to make contracts for the exercise of its corporate powers. A “joint powers agreement,” defined as a contract specifying the terms and conditions of the joint exercise of powers and duties entered into by participating governmental units, shall be an entity similar to the type of organization contemplated by the Regional Police District Law, with the power to sue and be sued; execute contracts and other instruments necessary for the exercise of its powers; make and amend policies and procedures; receive and expend funds; borrow money; and employ personnel to carry out the purposes of the joint powers agreement. The entity shall be governed by a board of directors comprised of at least one member representing each participating governmental unit. Each member shall have one vote.²⁴

An intermunicipal agreement would provide the Towns with flexibility to negotiate terms that may better reflect their needs than the provisions of the Regional Police District Law. However, the statute also states that “a city or town may not contract for any purpose, on any terms, or under any conditions inconsistent with any applicable provision of any general or special law.”²⁵ The Towns should consult with their respective legal counsel prior to proceeding with further discussion on consolidation to ensure that there is no conflict between the two statutes.

Finally, creation of a regional district can be accomplished by special act of the legislature. The process would begin with a home rule petition. That process would require local approval, followed by approval during the annual legislative session, and would therefore be time sensitive. However, because of the legislature’s wide authority in molding the statutory authority of a regional organization, it would allow for flexibility in addressing the communities’ requirements.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Further evaluate consolidation of the Blandford and Chester Police Departments and potential operating costs.

There are efficiencies to be gained from the consolidation of the Blandford and Chester Police Departments; as previously stated, both agencies and both towns are well-positioned for a successful consolidation into a regional police department. However, the legal model under which consolidation would be pursued must be evaluated carefully. One of the keys to success is the level of support on the part of elected officials and the community; that support is critical to a successful merger, and may be difficult to achieve with the apparently disproportionate impact of the cost assessment scheme specified by the Regional Police District statute of the Massachusetts General Law. Seeking a special act of the legislature to create a district structure that is more closely tailored to the needs of the communities is a more cumbersome and potentially time consuming process. Consolidation by means of

²³ MGL Part I, Title VII, Chapter 40 §4, “Towns: Power to Contract: Purposes

²⁴ <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleVII/Chapter40/Section4A1~2>

²⁵ <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleVII/Chapter40/Section4>

an intermunicipal agreement is the least complicated means of accomplishing the goal, but it will require review by the Towns' legal counsel to ensure the applicability of MGL Chapter 40 §4 to police consolidation and to verify the absence of conflict with the provisions of Chapter 41 §99 A – K.

Future operating costs – and perhaps as importantly in light of the statutory requirements, the process for assessment of those costs -- should be reviewed carefully. An alternative arrangement, such as contracting for police coverage, may warrant consideration either as a long-term measure or while the fiscal implications are considered, special legislative action is sought, or legislative efforts to amend the statute are reviewed and pursued. For the purposes of this report, it has been assumed that the communities' annual police budgets will remain the same and be combined to fund a regional police department. The apportionment of costs, and final determination of the service levels for each community, will be subject to the Towns' negotiation of a final agreement, and increased levels of service may require additional funding.

Contracting for Police Services

Another model that has become increasingly common is for municipalities to contract for police services. The terms are open for negotiation; they can range from the assignment of periodic patrols, to one officer and car per shift, to response to calls without proactive patrol. For example, the City of Reading, Pennsylvania has provided coverage to the neighboring Borough of Kenhorst on a contract basis since 2010, providing a set number of officers per day, in Reading Police uniforms and vehicles, to patrol the Borough and provide all necessary police services. The contract was recently extended through 2021.

Westchester County, New York had a similar arrangement with the Town of Ossining, which disbanded its police department in 2010 and contracted with the County Department of Public Safety to provide coverage. Upon the expiration of the original contract, the Town of Ossining negotiated a new arrangement with the neighboring Village of Ossining, which now polices the Town. In 2015, Westchester County contracted to police the Village of Mount Kisco, absorbing the members of that department into the County Police. The County has a lengthy precedent for this; it contracted to provide limited police services to the Town of Cortlandt when it dissolved its police department in 1998. The nearby Town of Putnam Valley disbanded its police department and contracted with the Putnam County Sheriff's Office in 1997.

King County, Washington operates under a different model. Sheriff's Department employees provide police services to municipalities as their own departments, with municipal uniforms, vehicles, patches, and command staff. A town police chief may actually be a Sheriff's Department officer on assignment.

Under a contracted services model, a town essentially disbands its police department and negotiates a desired level of service and an associated fee with the providing municipality. The fee would include all associated costs, factoring in salary, vehicle and equipment expense, an appropriate portion of training and other administrative expenses, and frequently an administrative fee. The benefit to the contracting community is the elimination of variable costs and the workload associated with the operation of a police department in return for a set level of service and a set fee. For the service provider, the arrangement should at the minimum break even but can be negotiated so that some revenue or other benefit accrues to the town. A disadvantage is the reduction of direct control over patrol officers, since they are employed and supervised by another jurisdiction.

For a contracted services model to work effectively, the providing town's resources have to be increased as necessary to meet the demands of the negotiated agreement, enabling it to maintain or increase its current level of service to its residents while supplying the agreed upon level of service to the contracting party. Within that framework, the contracted services model may take almost any form acceptable to the parties.

Under a contracted services model, for example, Blandford could enter into an agreement with Chester to provide coverage for the current four hours monthly of public office hours and a specific number of patrol hours per week. The cost would reflect the higher salary paid to Chester officers, an apportionment of patrol vehicle expenses (such as an additional hourly fee representing an estimated operating cost, or a mileage based fee), and a small amount to offset administrative expenses. Additional coverage costs could be negotiated in the form of either flat rates for known anticipated needs (such as a specific fee to furnish officers for a recurring annual event), or for response to unanticipated events or emergencies.

There are benefits to this arrangement and a history of success in other jurisdictions. While cost savings are not always as extensive as anticipated, operational efficiencies can be achieved and local government can be streamlined. Of course, this is a major change for a town, and like consolidation, requires strong support from elected officials and the community.

RECOMMENDATION 3: As an alternative to regionalization, engage in further discussions regarding contracted services.

Contracting for police services provides an opportunity for individual towns to streamline their police operations without the creation of a full regional police department, potentially generating savings but, more importantly, enhanced administration and operational efficiencies. It can also serve as a trial run for a potential merger, allowing the participants to evaluate shared services without the encumbrances of the statutory consolidation process, similar to the evaluation of a shared police chief currently taking place in Athol and Orange, Massachusetts. Like consolidation, it will require consensus of the two boards of elected officials and the support of the affected communities. As an initial step, elected officials should determine whether such an arrangement would be suitable for them – as provider or recipient – then begin discussion of the terms that would be acceptable to them. Additional data should be collected regarding workload and finances, and an operational assessment of each of the participating agencies should be conducted to identify issues that should be resolved prior to entering an intermunicipal agreement.

Consolidation of Administration and Training

As noted at the outset of this report, the “back office” operation required by modern policing is considerable. The administrative tasks associated with running a police department – such as training, scheduling, payroll, recordkeeping, statistical analysis, updating of policies, evidence management, review of reports, legal updates, human resources administration, information technology, recruitment and retention, procurement and maintenance of equipment, fleet management, building maintenance, and similar tasks beyond routine patrol – are comparable regardless of the size of the agency.

In fact, the burden may be proportionally higher in a smaller department, or one staffed largely by part-time employees. For example, the 40 hours of annual training required by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts represents about two percent of a full-time officer's scheduled hours. For a part-time officer who works one eight hour shift per week, the training obligation represents almost 10 percent of his or her scheduled work time. Yet it is critical for each town that all departmental training and

administrative obligations are met. When one looks at a small police agency, usually fielding only one officer per shift on patrol, the cost is often inordinately high when considered in proportion to the size and level of activity of the department.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Consider the benefits of collaboration or contracting of administrative oversight as a more cost-effective approach to meeting administrative obligations.

One option considered by many police agencies exploring consolidation is the merging of administrative or non-patrol functions. Contracting the staffing of office hours, which provide residents with an important opportunity to transact business with the Police Department, would free officers for patrol.

It appears that certain efficiencies might be achieved by contracting among the agencies to assume many administrative tasks, such as scheduling, training, and records management. Determination of a reasonable fee for services provided would enable the contracting agency to divert some of the hours currently consumed by administrative tasks to patrol time, and the contracted agency would be compensated for assuming the tasks, which would enable that department to increase staff hours to handle the workload and concomitantly increase patrol availability.

Sharing the Services of a Chief of Police

The Departments currently share the services of a Chief of Police. The incumbent has been Chief in the Town of Chester for nine years, and was hired by Blandford in September 2018. He is highly regarded and has built a solid structure for the Chester Police Department. As the only employee of the Blandford Police Department, the Chief staffs office hours and periodically patrols the Town.

A number of communities have shared the services of a police chief either on an interim or a long-term basis; for example, Orange and Athol, Massachusetts. In most cases, the Chief is primarily an administrator, rather than a “working Chief,” as in this case, where the Chief also fills a patrol officer role. The Chief wears different uniforms in Blandford and Chester and accounts for time spent working for each Department.

Due to the limited part-time nature of these two Departments, sharing a police chief is an option. However, a Chief should be available to respond to and take command of major incidents. Therefore, guidelines would have to be developed to clearly delineate the scope of the Chief’s responsibility and when he would be released from duty in one town to handle matters in the other. It is especially important since he is on two government payrolls. There have been cases in other municipalities in which part-time officers – including police chiefs – have been accused of “double dipping,” collecting pay for hours worked in two towns at the same time. There is absolutely no reason to suspect that this would happen. On the contrary, it is important to protect the Chief and the Towns from the unfortunate possibility of allegations of such conduct generated by any number of sources: disgruntled employees; political adversaries; dissatisfied taxpayers; misinformed residents; or people who might feel that one town is receiving an inappropriately high or low level of service. Clear guidelines should be established collaboratively between the Towns setting forth protocols under which the Chief is released from duty in one town to attend to emergencies in the other, as well as reasonable guidelines for the use of Department vehicles. There should be concise policies for compensation and reporting of hours worked. Attention to detail in this area can prevent or minimize controversy and distraction in the future and will enable both towns to address and resolve and allegations of impropriety quickly and with minimal disruption.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Consider the benefits of sharing the services of a Chief of Police.

Although it is not the preferred option, largely because of the potential conflicts that can arise as a result of working for two separate employers, sharing a police chief can be an alternative to the preferable choice – consolidation of agencies.

Operational Issues to be Addressed

Whichever alternative the Towns choose to pursue, certain operational and administrative issues should be addressed. Some are items that will be critical to a successful consolidation; others are needed to enhance efficient operations regardless of a determination to merge agencies.

Records Management: The Chester Police Department utilizes the Crime Star Law Enforcement Management System to manage reports and provide basic tracking of activity. The Blandford Police Department does not have a Records Management System in place, and reports are prepared as Microsoft® Word documents. If the departments consolidate, an additional license for the system can be obtained for \$300 to manage Blandford’s records. If the Blandford Police Department remains as an independent agency, it is important that it implement a digital records management system.

Vehicle Replacement: The Chester Police Department has two cruisers; one is assigned to the Chief of Police and the second to patrol. A new vehicle is purchased every four years to maintain an eight year replacement cycle. The Blandford Police Department has two Ford Crown Victoria cruisers which are aging and nearing the end of their serviceable life. A third SUV cruiser was recently obtained as a surplus vehicle from the Massachusetts State Police. Although it is in good condition, it has high mileage. The Town of Blandford does not have a vehicle replacement plan. It should implement one to ensure that cruisers are replaced on a regular cycle based on age, condition, and repair history.

Policies and Procedures: The Chester Police Department has written rules, policies, and procedures, which are maintained in digital form. The Blandford Police Department does not have such a document at this time. Written policies and procedures should be developed and issued.

Dispatch: Calls for the Chester Police Department, as well as the Fire Department, EMS, and Mutual Aid, are dispatched by Northampton Control, a dispatch center run by the Commonwealth and located at the State Police Barracks in Northampton. Calls for the Blandford Police Department, Fire Department, EMS, and Mutual Aid are dispatched by Berkshire Control, a dispatch center run by the Berkshire County Sheriff’s Office. Berkshire Control is not in direct contact with Northampton Control, which results in an extra step as calls are transferred to Northampton Control for dispatch to Chester units. While Fire Department and EMS calls are dispatched directly, Police calls must be transferred through Northampton for dispatch of State Police or Chester Units. In addition, Blandford uses a low-band radio frequency, which is not compatible with the 800 megahertz band used by Chester and the State Police. Chester uses dual band radios that are capable of monitoring both agencies. In the event of consolidation, the Blandford Police Department should transfer its dispatch operation to Northampton Control, and procure the necessary radio hardware. If the agencies remain separate, that transfer would also be recommended, since it eliminates a step in dispatching calls and allows for more direct communication with the neighboring Department. Dual band portable radios are priced at approximately \$6,500.00; mobile radios for vehicle installation are approximately \$7,500.

Portable Radio Repeaters: To address poor radio reception in the area, as well as portable radio reception in buildings, the Chester Police Department has obtained two Digital Vehicle Repeater Systems (DVRS). These units essentially turn police vehicles into portable radio repeaters. They receive

transmissions and rebroadcast them with a stronger signal to reach portable radios when officers are out of their cruisers in poor reception areas, and rebroadcast transmissions from portable radios to reach repeater towers. To improve radio reception, the Blandford Police Department should obtain such units for its cruisers. The unit price is approximately \$10,000.

Salary Adjustment for Consolidation: Currently, all Chester Police Officers are paid \$18.50 per hour. Blandford Police Officers were paid \$15.00 per hour, and the former Chief was paid \$20.00 per hour. If the Towns elect to pursue consolidation, Blandford will have to adjust its salary rates and budget accordingly.

Assign Patrol Shifts to Coincide with Activity: Although efforts are made to assign patrol shifts to coincide with peak activity, because of the nature of a part-time workforce, scheduling often depends on officers' availability. In addition, there is little call volume – less than one call a day – on which to base such judgments. Very little data is available; Northampton Control provided activity by day of the week, while Berkshire Control provided only the number of calls handled annually by the Blandford Police Department and the State Police. Northampton Control's data for the Town of Chester indicated that the busiest days of the week were Friday (60 calls), Wednesday (59 calls), and Tuesday (53 calls). The remaining days were lighter: Thursday (40 calls) Monday (38 calls) Saturday (31 calls) and Sunday (30 calls). When possible, pending collection of additional data, officers should be assigned to the days and hours of heaviest activity.

Enhance Data Collection: Although the data points are so small that it is difficult to detect patterns of activity, the Chester Police Department should use its Records Management System to document, to the extent possible, the days and hours of peak activity. The Blandford Police Department, which currently has no Records Management System in place, should implement one and develop criteria for data collection and tracking of activity. Collection of data in readily retrievable form that will provide the number of calls received by day of the week and hour of the day, the number handled by local police officers, the number handled by the Massachusetts State Police, and the time expended by officers in responding to calls will support a more data driven analysis of activity that will assist in future planning efforts.

Police Facilities: Both Departments currently have adequate office space to meet their needs. However, neither has secure space in which to interview or process prisoners. Towns with populations of less than 5,000 are not legally required to maintain a prisoner detention facility.²⁶ This does not pose a problem because of the proximity of the State Police barracks in Russell; prisoners are brought there for processing. Both Departments also have a very low volume of arrests. The situation should be monitored as a potential future need, however. In the event that the State Police relocates the barracks, or the Departments are no longer authorized to use their facilities for booking prisoners, it will become a more pressing need.

Items to Be Addressed in the Merger Process

Numerous items would have to be reviewed and addressed to create a regional police department, including, but not limited to, the following:

- Review of legal or legislative actions required to implement the merger. Much of this is specified in the Regional Police District Law.
- Design of a command/supervisory structure.

²⁶ <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleVII/Chapter40/Section34>

- Designation of the name of a merged agency.
- Design of uniforms, patches, and vehicle markings.
- Adjustment of pay scales, including:
 - Equalization of rates; salary rates for Chester officers are currently higher than those of Blandford officers.
- Review of hiring and appointment processes to address any procedural differences between the two towns.
- Merging of files and records management systems.
- Standardizing hardware and software; installation of Mobile Digital Terminals as needed.
- Standardization of rules and procedures.
- Standardization of weapons and related equipment.
- Transfer of Blandford dispatch services from Berkshire Control to Northampton Control.
- Revision of dispatch protocols with Northampton Control and the Massachusetts State Police.
- Public education regarding the consolidation.
- Evaluation of building facilities; determination regarding use as substations, or physically consolidating all personnel in one location.
- Determining the financial contribution, if any, expected of each town toward any necessary facility and equipment enhancements.
- Determining operating costs to be borne by each municipality, future cost escalators, and payment processes.
- Creating a vehicle and equipment replacement plan, with a formula for assessing costs for capital expenditures (i.e., vehicles).
- Setting standards of service for each community, i.e., minimum shift staffing levels, areas and methods of patrol, guidelines for assignment of overtime or staffing of shifts, circumstances under which personnel may be redeployed to another community.
- Establishment and publication of Policies and Procedures.
- Transfer of vehicles and equipment to the new agency.

Costs Associated with Consolidation of Departments

There are startup costs associated with the creation of a regional police department. The following is a rough preliminary estimate of basic costs; details will be refined and additional costs will emerge in the course of discussion if the parties choose to pursue consolidation. Grant funding is likely to be available to cover expenses.

Table 4: Preliminary Estimate of Basic Regional Police Department Startup Costs

Item	Estimated Cost
Purchase of dual band portable radios (Blandford)	\$13,000 (2 @ \$6,500)
Purchase of Digital Vehicle Repeater Systems (Blandford)	\$20,000 (2 @ \$10,000)
Crime Star Records Management System License	\$300
Standardization of software	\$1,000
Salary Adjustment (Blandford)	\$4,500
Standardization of uniforms, patches, etc.	\$1,000
Re-marking of cruisers	\$2,500
Implementation of vehicle replacement plan (Blandford) to support eight-year replacement cycle	\$40,000 (or \$10,000 annually)
Total	\$82,300

Conclusion

The Novak Consulting Group has presented several options for enhancement of the delivery of police services in the Towns of Blandford and Chester by means of shared services or consolidation. Ultimately, it is up to the elected officials of the Towns to determine what actions best meet the needs of their respective communities.

The merger of police departments is a major step for any community. In addition to the amount of work that must be undertaken to implement such a change, it can be a controversial move that provokes a strong reaction. Success depends on the support of the employees involved, attention to detail, and primarily on the political will to move forward with the process.

This report examines consolidation of the two police departments into a regional agency; contracting for the delivery of police services; contracting or consolidating administrative or specialized services; and sharing the services of a police chief. All are viable options, and they also present challenges. This report attempts to provide an overview of the process sufficient for the elected officials of the two communities to make an informed decision as to whether it is in the interest of their communities to further pursue any of these options. Based on our interaction with the elected officials and the employees of the Towns of Blandford and Chester, we are confident that they have the capability of moving forward with whichever option is selected.