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## **MoJ seizes control of Birmingham prison from G4S**

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has been forced to take immediate control of HMP Birmingham from its contractor G4S, after a damning inspection found that prisoners used drink, drugs and violence with impunity and corridors were littered with cockroaches, blood and vomit. The government is having to take the unprecedented step of seizing control of the failing prison, removing its governor and sweeping out hundreds of prisoners on Monday, just hours before an extraordinarily critical report is released by the prisons inspectorate. The state of the category B prison is likely to raise significant questions in the coming days about private sector involvement in the prison system. G4S was awarded a 15-year contract to run the prison in 2011. The chief inspector of prisons, Peter Clarke, said there had been “dramatic deterioration” since the last inspection in early 2017 and the government should launch an urgent inquiry into the appalling state of the prison, the most violent in England and Wales and the site of riots in 2016. Prison gangs perpetrating the violence “could do so with near impunity”, he said. Inspectors saw prisoners who were evidently under the influence of drink or drugs, which went unchallenged, including widespread use of the psychoactive drug spice. Staff were fearful and experienced widespread bullying, the report said, and inspectors witnessed an arson attack on a supposedly secure staff car park during their inspection. Prison officers often had little grasp of where prisoners were, the report found. Communal areas were filthy, with cockroaches, vermin, blood and vomit left uncleaned, and wings that had virtually every window damaged or missing. Clarke said the report contained “some of the most disturbing evidence that inspectors ... have seen in any prison.” In his letter to the justice secretary, David Gauke, Clarke said there was an “urgent and pressing need to address the squalor, violence, prevalence of drugs and looming lack of control”. Clarke said he was “astounded that HMP Birmingham had been allowed to deteriorate so dramatically”. He said he had no confidence in the ability of the prison to make improvements. “There has clearly been an abject failure of contract management and delivery ... the inertia that seems to have gripped both those monitoring the contract and delivering it on the ground has led to one of Britain’s leading jails slipping into a state of crisis.” Clarke has invoked an “urgent notification protocol”, a device that puts the justice secretary on notice that urgent action is needed to address significant concerns at a jail. The MoJ said it had instigated an intensive period of improvement measures with little success, forcing it to take the prison back under government control. HM Prison and Probation Service will run the prison for an initial six months, before assessing whether control can be returned to G4S. The “step in” process is not technically nationalisation, but a process allowed when a provider is deemed to have breached its contract to run the prison safely, meaning there is no liability to the taxpayer. No staff redundancies will take place, though the MoJ said it would send in an additional 30 members of experienced prison staff as well as a new governor, Paul Newton, formally of HMP Swaleside. More than 300 prisoners will be moved from the prison while the jail is overhauled. The prisons minister, Rory Stewart, said the conditions in the prison were clearly unacceptable. “It has become clear that drastic action is required to bring about the improvements we require,” he said. “This ‘step in’ means that we can provide additional resources to the prison while insulating the taxpayer from the inevitable cost this entails. “We have good, privately run prisons across the country and while Birmingham faces its own particular set of challenges, I am absolutely clear that it must start to live up to the standards seen elsewhere.” However, MoJ sources have been keen to stress the government does not believe privatisation was at the root of the prison’s troubles, pointing out that other G4S prisons including HMP Oakwood had recently received good inspection reports. Stewart has staked his own reputation on dramatic improvements to the prison system, telling the BBC he would resign in a year if he has not managed to reduce the level of drugs and violence in 10 target jails, although Birmingham was not among them. The MoJ said it was clear that the prison was still suffering significant effects following the 2016 riots involving more than 600 prisoners, the worst since the infamous Strangeways riots in 1990. The government was forced to send in specially trained Tornado Squad officers, who battled prisoners for more than 12 hours. A report by the independent monitoring board ahead of the riots had warned of the

dangers posed by prisoners under the influence of psychoactive drugs including spice and black mamba. Assaults on staff at HMP Birmingham rose 84% to a record high of 164 incidents last year, according to MoJ figures. The “step in” to take control in Birmingham is the first time such drastic measures have been used mid-contract. In 2016, the government stepped in at the end of its contract with G4S to run Medway Secure Training Centre, after undercover reporters filmed staff apparently mistreating children. The security giant also lost its contract in 2015 to run Rainsbrook STC after prison inspectors graded it inadequate, reporting that some staff behaved “extremely inappropriately” with young people. Jerry Petherick, G4S’s managing director of custody and detention services, said: “HMP Birmingham is an inner-city remand prison which faces exceptional challenges including increasingly high levels of prisoner violence towards staff and fellow prisoners. “The wellbeing and safety of prisoners and prison staff is our key priority and we welcome the six-month step-in and the opportunity to work with the Ministry of Justice to urgently address the issues faced at the prison.”