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[Home](#) > Civil Service Awards: Delivering benefits technology fit for the 21st century

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## Civil Service Awards: Delivering benefits technology fit for the 21st century

Written by Civil Service World on 11 May 2021

[DWP staff won the Project Delivery Excellence Award for a project to upgrade systems delivering jobseekers' allowance and many other benefits during the first wave of the Covid pandemic. Mark Bell tells CSW how it was done](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

The Virtual Machine Environment Replacement (VME-R) project replaced ageing legacy infrastructure with more modern technology needed to enable future welfare policy changes to be implemented. This complex and intensive programme has seen the Department for Work and Pensions rebuild technology, some of which was more than 40 years old, which supports its core benefit payment systems.

Altogether, 11 critical benefit systems were replaced with zero disruption to DWP's benefit operations or delays to citizen payments. The largest four of these systems was replaced in the middle of the global pandemic, as DWP Digital rose to the challenge amid remote working and lockdowns. The applications pay out more than £150bn a year to millions of UK citizens.



The project was a DWP in-house exercise between the DWP Digital and Service Planning and Delivery – Change Delivery teams, and created opportunity for DWP to further move away from outsourced IT services towards a fully in-sourced digital organisation. The project helped DWP Digital staff to build capability, learn new skills and own their careers as the programme progressed.

### **Replacing the largest benefit system**

Over Easter 2020, the VME-R project replaced jobseeker's allowance, the department's largest benefit system, remotely and at pace. Replacing the old service was particularly critical at this time as demand on the JSA system rocketed to unprecedented levels due to the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The JSA payment system was introduced in the 1990s, and based on an IT code set designed in the 1960s, although as new technical and policy requirements changed code was added over the years.

The replacement was the culmination of two years of planning, although the increase in benefit claims meant the programme was reviewed to boost capability in order to support around one million additional jobseeker's allowance claims and support thousands of new operational staff.

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