

Sapphire Case Study: Mears Group



“MaxiSun is a great reason to choose Sapphire over another SunSystems reseller.”

Ben Westran
Group Financial Controller
Mears Group UK

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Mears Group is a leading social housing repairs and maintenance provider in the UK, with a growing presence in the domiciliary care market. It also has a subsidiary mechanical and electrical division. Mears is an ambitious company with a powerful vision, operating in a growing market with an excellent financial base; strong, pro-active management; great people and an impressive client portfolio.

More than 8,000 people work at Mears and the group carries out more than 3,000 repairs each day to 500,000 houses nationwide. This is much needed work that upgrades peoples' homes, supports the wider community and improves quality of life for hundreds of thousands of people in the UK. As the UK's fastest growing national domiciliary care provider, Careforce delivers over 4,500,000 hours of care per annum from a network of branches working with 50 local authorities and Primary Care Trusts.

In 1999, Mears inherited an Infor FMS SunSystems solution as part of the acquisition of another company. On reviewing SunSystems Ben Westran, Group Financial Controller, and the finance team at Mears concluded it was more suited to the needs of the business than their existing solution, Summit 2000. The team were particularly impressed with the strong analysis functionality of SunSystems. They were also keen to benefit from the strong reporting capabilities of the Vision application, which would additionally facilitate the ease of data import into SunSystems. On migrating the group to SunSystems, Mears took the opportunity upgrade from SunSystems Version 4 to 5.

Mears was introduced to Sapphire as the incumbent SunSystems partner of the company that had been acquired - and the team were not disappointed. Ben observed “It was the support desk that really sold Sapphire to Mears – no one got upset by the amount of questions that we asked. Sapphire is a good service provider; very reliable and helpful in resolving any issues.”

New requirements

Due to new business regulations that came into force in early 2007, Mears had a need for a Construction Industry Solution (CIS) that would conform to the requirements of HMRC's new Construction Industry Scheme. It was critical for Mears that a solution be in place in advance of April 2007 in order to avoid incurring financial penalties.

Commenting on Sapphire's assistance with this project Ben said “Sapphire's help and advice in finding the right business solution was very good. We were pleased to be able to hand it over to our Sapphire Account Manager, Lucy Roberts, who managed the process.”

in the review process that Mears operates differently to mainstream construction companies and that the solution would need to be flexible enough to be configured accordingly. Furthermore, a key requirement was that the solution would integrate with SunSystems on an automated basis due to the high data volumes at Mears.

Sapphire authors MaxiSun; a powerful interface application module, that contains several modules to link third-party applications to SunSystems versions 4 & 5. It features a range of inbuilt configuration tools to convert transactional data into double-entry financial data – allowing for automated updates into SunSystems via the Ledger Import or SunSystems Connect (SSC) functions.

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This integration could be achieved utilising MaxiSun, Sapphire's integration solution. MaxiSun is a generic interface solution, linking any third party application to another for both transactional and reference data.

Following a comprehensive review, Mears took the decision to implement Pegasus CIS, with MaxiSun integration, as it was the best fit for their specific requirements. In explanation of the decision Ben said "Pegasus CIS can be configured in accordance with how Mears operates as a business. It also handles being integrated to other systems well, so is ideally suited for use with MaxiSun - which we had already used to link payroll to our internal job system, so we knew it was up to the task." He added "Pegasus was acquired by Infor, along with Systems Union [the original author of SunSystems], so it made it easier as we were able to do this all through Sapphire."

Working with Sapphire

Mears has now been using SunSystems and MaxiSun for a number of years. When asked about working with Sapphire Ben said "We have a very good working relationship with Sapphire, particularly with the development team. Logging a support call is very easy; in fact dealing with Sapphire on the whole is very easy."

He went on to say "Sapphire provide exceptional service. In the design phase we were able to customise things in order to suit our specific needs. MaxiSun is owned by Sapphire, so we are lucky enough to be in a position to push the boundaries of what MaxiSun can do and potentially steer the direction of development – the team at Sapphire is very receptive to feedback."

Benefits to Mears

When asked how implementing MaxiSun has benefited Mears, Ben explained "MaxiSun is a reliable and robust system that is very flexible. One of the key benefits of using MaxiSun is the ease of integration, allowing us to redeploy the resource that was doing this manually to other areas - it can all run in the background provided that the quality of the source data is good."

He adds "We have also benefited from improved data accuracy, as using MaxiSun eradicates human errors. It has reduced data processing time, and improved data security. MaxiSun is performing well and is being used for much more than we originally expected. We are able to throw large volumes of data at SunSystems and deal with an extremely high number of transactions: SunSystems and MaxiSun are scalable solutions that can handle the volume."

Mears recently upgraded to MaxiSun Advanced (MSA). On the decision to upgrade Ben said "Pretty much the only downside with the original version was that if I wanted any changes made, they would need to be done via the Sapphire development team; with MSA I am able to do much of the necessary work myself. For example, I can now change or update queries and I even linked SunSystems to our in-house job system myself. The upgrade to MSA was very quick and was well worth doing."

Ben goes on to advise others implementing a new solution: "Investment in proper training on how to use the system implemented will pay huge dividends and enable you to really take ownership of the system."

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Further integration

What started out as a relatively small requirement for MaxiSun has quickly grown across the entire Mears Group. Mears primarily use MaxiSun to link SunSystems with Pegasus CIS, as well as their in-house bespoke job system. It has also been used to integrate 5 of their business units within SunSystems, where it synchronises chart of account, customer and supplier data across business units.

When asked how many companies in the Mears Group currently use SunSystems and MaxiSun, Ben said "There are 8 business units, 1 of which has 20 statutory companies alone, so the short answer would be lots!" Mears has a 48 user SunSystems licence, with 40 – 42 people logged into the system most of the time.

Looking ahead

Mears will be completing an upgrade to SunSystems 5.3 later this year, and have a number of other applications that they are looking to integrate using MaxiSun over the coming months. Looking ahead Ben says "Integrating sales invoicing is in the early stages at the moment. We started this a few weeks ago and will roll it out in the next month."

When asked whether he would recommend MaxiSun and SunSystems to other organisations, Ben confirmed "With SunSystems we have a much better handle on what's happening in the business, with the added benefit of improved dataflow thanks to the integration. I would also recommend MaxiSun as it is reliable and easy to use; for us it has meant a single point of integration with no need to rip and replace existing systems." He concludes "MaxiSun is a great reason to choose Sapphire over another SunSystems reseller."



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