

## PENNINE CARE/BLUE FOREST

# TREE HUGGING

**A state-of-the-art treehouse for a Bury hospital has delivered astonishing results for patients. No wonder it won a healthcare construction award**

**AN** innovative woodland retreat for the rehabilitation of young people with mental health issues has won an award for Best External Environment.

The Woodland Retreat, a service provided by Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust, won the award at the Building Better Healthcare Awards 2013 for its imagination and inclusion of service users. Based in Bury, the state-of-the-art treehouse was the first mental health unit of its kind in the country and introduced young people from Pennine Care's nearby Hope and Horizon units to relaxation and learning, enhancing the therapeutic approach.

The judges said: "We were particularly impressed with the imagination shown by the trust in recognising how a very challenging, sloping site could be redesigned to provide such a stunning, interesting and engaging space for young people."

Established in 2008 The Hope Unit is an acute psychiatric in-patient service for young people, ensuring they receive the treatment they need in an age-appropriate environment. The Horizon unit, which opened in 2010, was developed to enhance Pennine Care's ability to support young people with complex mental health problems. Between the two units there are 22 beds for young people aged 13-18 years, who receive treatment for a full range of mental health or psychiatric disorders.

### Blending in

The aim was to create a playful, educational and sustainable place where young people with acute and intermediate mental health issues could spend time with each other, with family members and with the wider community in an outdoor environment. The patients themselves designed the space, which has been developed on wasteland.

The project's innovation comes from the adoption of a treehouse concept to blend into the surrounding environment and otherwise disused woodland area, expanding this idea to enable activities such as gardening and the cultivation of vegetables. This encourages independence, meaningful social interaction and a heightened awareness of responsibility and care, all important to enhancing the patient experience.

Pennine Care funded the £178,000 development, helped by a £100,000 grant from the Department of Health, via the King's Fund.

Set in the natural woodland next to the Hope and Horizon units, the Woodland Retreat includes a 40 metre wooden treehouse, complete with decked area, barbecue and allotment.

Pennine Care elected to work with Blue Forest, a specialist tree house company renowned for creating structures that reflect the environment in which they are built.

Andy Payne, Blue Forest's managing director, says: "The space utilised was in an area of wasteland and careful thought was given in the design of the tree house to ensure that the structure is in keeping with its host environment. Key considerations included the selection and sourcing of materials, management practice, construction methods, conservation and waste management."

A variety of different types of external timber cladding help the building blend in with its surrounding environment. The structure is raised off the ground and supported on solid timber posts. In this way the scheme required less



**Patients were involved in the treehouse design process**

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landscaping, allowing it to be built on the steeply sloping site with little need for the removal of any of the existing trees, flora or fauna.

The building is made from sustainably sourced wood (FSC/PEFC) and felled saplings from the site were reused to construct perimeter fencing. Glulam beams have been used to create an open internal space that feels bright and spacious.

### Patient involvement

The Blue Forest team offered the unique opportunity for the service users themselves to help develop the design in a practical and collaborative process. Keith Walker, specialist services director at Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust, says that as treating young people with mental illness can be challenging it was important to find new and engaging ways to support their rehabilitation.

"The young people who use our services said they wanted a place that was totally different from the clinical surroundings of the ward, which prompted the development of the Woodland Retreat," says Walker. "Many of the young people who access our services have had poor life experiences and we hope that the retreat will help to build their confidence and make them feel valued."

The retreat has played a key part in reducing the length of stay by 10 days, a 65% reduction in the incidents of violence and aggression and an 8.5% reduction in self-harming incidents.

"Parents are very pleased when they visit," says one member of staff. "It instills a sense of reassurance that their child is being cared for in a service that values young people and cares for their needs in an age-appropriate way." ●