Big Interview: Newquay's Headland Hotel director Veryan Palmer on employment opportunities for young people

Think Newquay and it's likely that surf, sand and arcade games spring to mind. Homelessness and leaving school aren't likely to feature. But the five star hotel on the headland above Fistral Beach is deeply invested in the wellbeing of its employees – especially the young ones.

The Headland Hotel employs around 200 people – 250 in summer – and makes sure to pay those over the age of 18 a real Living Wage.

The Real Living Wage is the only UK wage rate that is voluntarily paid by over 12,000 UK businesses who believe their staff deserve a wage which meets everyday needs. And with more than 3,700 people in Cornwall and Devon homeless, coupled with figures showing around 11,500 people – just over 3.5% of the working age population – were claiming unemployment related benefits in February 2022, initiatives like this can only be positive news.

Last year the Headland Hotel became the first Newquay hotel to receive Real Living Wage accreditation. The Headland pays all staff over 18 years old at least £11.00 per hour, compared to the National Minimum Wage for 18-20 year olds, which is currently £7.49 per hour.

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Veryan Palmer, 39, has been director of the five-star hotel since November 2020 when she took the reins from her parents. The hotel gained its five-star reputation in 2019 and planned to achieve the Real Living Wage accreditation by 2025. Ms Palmer is thrilled "to have achieved it earlier than expected".

She explained: "Here we give staff 100% of the service charge, gratuities, everything. Nothing is kept by the hotel, it goes to staff, excluding senior managers. Most of the team are earning £12.50 an hour, but are guaranteed £11.

"There is a massive housing crisis in Cornwall and we are a Cornish hotel and we have a triple line strategy, people and planet, and if you look after both of these, we genuinely believe that our profits will come. We then reinvest all of our profits back into the hotel, everything, every penny. We have just spent £3m on our new restaurant and kitchen and a new staff dining area."

Not only does the five star Newquay-based hotel reinvest in itself, but it pours many resources into improving the lives of young local people. Ms Palmer told *BusinessLive* how the Headland Hotel works closely with Truro and Penwith College on its apprenticeship scheme. She explained how they have "up to 20 apprenticeships on our books at any given time." And in some cases the hotel will fund some of its staff "all the way up to Masters degree level."

The Headland Hotel’s Aqua club, overlooking Fistral Beach (Image: Headland Hotel)

However, what the young apprentices are missing out on is the experience of working with highly qualified “middle managers.” Ms Palmer explained that since Brexit those who have “worked a decade in Italy, France, Spain aren’t able to come over any more.”

She continued: “You could teach someone how to make beautiful lattes and be a barista but actually what’s the very best is to work alongside someone else who is making beautiful coffee for two weeks.

“So we can provide the training but that ongoing peer-to-peer learning, that is where we miss out now. In Cornwall there aren’t any other five star hotels. There are two, the other one is quite small however. So a lot of people have never stepped foot inside a five star hotel and it is quite difficult for them to know what the expectation is. So when we do have people from upcountry or abroad, who have maybe had a

greater opportunity to work in a five star hotel, those tiny little nuances of how to talk to people can be shared.”

Despite this, the hotel is deeply invested in supporting its young people and giving them valuable hands-on working experience. Ms Palmer said: “We run a 14 to 16-year-old summer placement scheme. The third cohort is coming through. We pay them £9 an hour, when there’s no minimum wage for 14 to 15-year-olds, which is terrible in my eyes.

“We do everything to try and help them gain real experience, we treat them as adults, they have to clock in and have proper employment contracts. We received over 100 applications for 10 places. Some of the cohort from last year and two years ago are back with us on the apprenticeship scheme this year. We treat young people with respect, we don’t ask them to work ridiculous hours, and we help get them here as public transport is not reliable.”

Ms Palmer works closely with local schools so that she can offer children who are at profound risk from being excluded “an opportunity to be treated fairly.”

Simon Reeve (top left) met with director Veryan Palmer (top right) and Headland Hotel employees Ethan Bramhall (bottom left) and Andy Delve (bottom right)
(Image: Ruth Mayer Headland Hotel)

She explained: “During academic hours, term time, we offer these students work experience. We have three currently from local schools and it is working so well. All three of them are bright and bubbly, they just don’t like school. Here, they get treated like adults. In particular, one young person was not attending school but they and I had an agreement that for a placement two days a week they would attend their maths and english lessons to get their 4s in their GCSEs.”

Not only do Ms Palmer and the team give the children work but they also teach them valuable life skills such as how to read their payslips properly and how to talk to their employers. The Headland Hotel liaises with the schools, so that they can offer placements to those children who would potentially benefit the most.

“I do genuinely think that some 14 year olds will genuinely do better on a very structured apprenticeship,” she said.

Ms Palmer spends a lot of her time advising and educating schools and young people on their rights and opportunities in the hospitality industry.

She explained: “I go out and talk about the hospitality industry in just about any primary or secondary school or college. So I’m normally, at least once a fortnight, all over Cornwall from Camelford, down to Helston to Cape Cornwall, everywhere, just talking about hospitality, talking about employment rights for young people.

“I help to inform them about what they are legally allowed to work and I help the teachers know what it is and I ask them to report to their safeguarding liaison to see if anyone is working more than they should. With that I also do a lot of work with alternative education provisions, so that is with schools who have pupils with additional needs or learning disabilities.”

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The hotel, for example, offers students from Kehelland college – which provides specialist education – the chance to work a few days a week in the hotel.

“We have up to three of them for one or two days a week during term time for a year on work experience. Some of the younger people there have quite significant needs and we have been able to offer them contracted roles at the end of them. With some of them they need an extended period for them to learn the role. We also work with Truro and Penwith College foundation skills department, which is aimed at young people with additional needs to help them settle into trying to find work.”

Finally, it's not only the young that the Headland Hotel supports. It also works closely with homeless charity, DISC Newquay. Since January 2021, the hotel has been providing the charity's weekly fruit and vegetables, which they have delivered from one of the local fruit merchants.

Ms Palmer explains how the hotel and charity's relationship has been built on this and now the Headland Hotel tries to offer some people a job and roof over their heads.

She said: "We have a little bit of staff accommodation on site, we have three rooms. But we also have a great network of local landlords that we can say 'we have someone joining us, do you have a room available?' We then guarantee their deposit. We try and support those who work with us.

"Over the last two years we have helped 13 people who were street homeless and have worked with us. It can be challenging but some of the people who come through Monique have gone onto bigger and better jobs, which is so brilliant. We have another two candidates who hopefully very shortly will be coming to join us."

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