

SALTWATERHR



MATERNITY LEAVE & SMALL BUSINESSES

BALANCING COST, COVER & COMPLIANCE

A practical guide for employers



THE CHALLENGE

Maternity leave can feel especially disruptive when you're running a lean team:

- Every role is critical: In a small business, there are fewer people to absorb extra tasks, and if one person steps out, their absence is immediately felt by clients and colleagues.
- Replacing skills and knowledge is costly: Employees often hold specialist knowledge, close client relationships, or unique skills. Finding someone with the right expertise, even short-term, can be difficult and expensive.
- Training temporary staff takes time: Cover staff may take weeks to get up to speed and during that period, productivity can dip further as other employees spend time training and supervising.
- Budgets are stretched thin: Unlike larger organisations, small businesses may not have spare budget to fund cover easily. Additionally, absorbing statutory pay while also funding additional support can feel like a double hit.

💡 Acknowledging these challenges is the first step. The good news is that with planning and creative solutions, they can be managed without compromising business performance or fairness to employees.

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T AVOID HIRING WOMEN

It might feel tempting to see hiring women as a risk that can lead to business disruption but avoiding it is short-sighted.

The upside of supporting maternity:

- Talent attraction
- Employee loyalty
- Reputation boost
- Engagement & productivity

The risks of discrimination:

- Legal penalties - pregnancy and maternity are protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010; discrimination can lead to costly tribunal claims and compensation
- Financial costs - defending claims drains money, time and focus, even if you win
- Reputational damage - negative publicity spreads fast and can harm your ability to recruit and retain staff
- Cultural impact - employees who witness discrimination lose trust, disengage, or leave

💡 Think of maternity as a career stage, not a career break.

STEP 1: PLAN AHEAD

Proactive planning removes uncertainty for both the business and the employee. The earlier you prepare, the smoother the transition.

1. Put a maternity leave policy in place

- Even in a small business, a written policy gives clarity.
- It sets out rights, responsibilities, and timelines (e.g. notice periods, statutory pay, KIT days).
- Having this upfront avoids confusion and reduces the risk of missteps that could lead to disputes.

2. Map the process clearly

Think of maternity as a journey with key stages:

- Notification – employee informs you of pregnancy and intended leave dates
- Risk assessments – ensure a safe working environment during pregnancy
- Leave confirmation – agree dates formally and confirm entitlements
- Handover – tasks, responsibilities, and client work passed on smoothly
- KIT days – agree how and when they'll be used
- Return to work – phased or full, with any flexible arrangements discussed in advance
- Having a flow mapped out means you're not reacting under pressure when each step arrives.

3. Start early

- Begin conversations as soon as the employee notifies you
- The more notice you have, the more options you'll find for cover, training, and redistribution of work
- Early planning also reassures the employee, building trust and reducing stress

💡 Think of your plan as a safety net — it protects the business from disruption and gives employees confidence that they'll be supported.

STEP 2: RETAIN KNOWLEDGE

Create a structured handover template

- Ask employees to document day-to-day tasks, key projects, and essential contacts
- Include deadlines, processes, and “where to find things” guidance
- Encourage sharing of tacit knowledge (tips, common pitfalls, client preferences)
- Store this in a shared system so cover staff can access it easily

STEP 3: COVER STRATEGICALLY

Not every role needs a full-time replacement.

- Contractors/freelancers – flexible, short-term, no long onboarding
- Job-shares – spread the workload between two part-timers
- Internal secondments – temporary development opportunity for another employee
- Focus on business-critical tasks first, then redistribute lower-priority work

STEP 4: STAY CONNECTED

Staying in touch helps both employee and employer.

- Agree how the employee wants to be contacted – not everyone wants regular check-ins
- KIT (Keeping in Touch) days can be a great way for employees to do work and stay up to date without losing their maternity pay..
- Plan a phased return where possible to ease transition
- Train managers to support returners without making assumptions about career ambitions.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Right now, most parental leave still falls on women.

Until policies shift towards a better balance of shared leave (with proper support), this imbalance will remain.

Small businesses can still lead by:

- Offering flexibility where possible
- Supporting both parents with policies and culture
- Normalising career progression after maternity

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

Supporting maternity leave effectively isn't just about compliance, it's a strategic investment in your business.

Reduce turnover and recruitment costs

- Employees who feel supported during maternity are more likely to return, reducing the need to hire and train replacements.
- Retaining talent preserves knowledge, client relationships, and team stability. Strengthen reputation as a fair and inclusive employer

Strengthen reputation as a fair and inclusive employer

- Businesses known for supporting parents attract respect from employees, clients, and the wider market.
- A strong reputation helps small businesses punch above their weight when competing for talent.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

Build resilience by embedding processes that work for everyone

- Well-documented workflows, cross-training, and handover processes benefit the whole team, not just maternity leave.
- Flexibility and planning help your business cope with other absences, unexpected departures, or growth transitions.

💡 Supporting maternity leave well is a win-win: it protects your business, retains talent, and creates a culture people want to be part of.