tick HR
SOLUTIONS

If your employee handbook hasn't been looked at in a while, you're not alone. For many small businesses, the handbook is created when the company starts hiring, then it sits in a folder until a problem appears.

A spring clean is a simple way to reduce risk and improve consistency. It helps you check that what you say you do matches what you do and that your managers are applying the same approach across the business. For an employer with 5–50 employees, that consistency can be the difference between a minor issue and a costly dispute.

Below is a practical, UK-focused guide to reviewing your employee handbook, what to prioritise, and how to keep it current without it becoming a yearly headache.

First: what an employee handbook should do in plain terms

A good handbook should:

- ✓ Set clear expectations for employees and managers
- ✓ Explain how key workplace situations are handled, absence, conduct, performance, etc.
- ✓ Support fair, consistent decision making
- ✓ Reflect your culture and ways of working not just generic wording

It's not just a nice to have. It's one of the easiest tools an employer has to reduce misunderstandings and show that processes are applied fairly.

Step 1: Check the basics you'd be surprised how often these are out of date

Start with a quick scan for:

- ✓ Company name and details especially if you've rebranded or changed trading names
- ✓ Version control a date/version number, so you know what's current
- ✓ Who it applies to all employees? workers? contractors?
- ✓ Where the current copy lives shared drive, HR platform, onboarding pack
- ✓ How updates are communicated so employees can't reasonably say they were never told

Quick win: Add a "Handbook Review Date" e.g., every April and October so it becomes routine.

Step 2: Prioritise the policies that create the most problems in small businesses

If you only review a handful of sections, focus here first. These are the areas that most often trigger conflict, inconsistency, or risk.

1 Sickness absence and reporting

Check that your handbook clearly states:

- ✓ How employees report absence who, when, and how
- ✓ When fit notes are required
- ✓ How return to work conversations is handled
- ✓ When absence becomes a concern and what happens next

Why it matters: Unclear reporting rules lead to frustration "I didn't know I had to call" and inconsistent management "one manager lets it slide, another doesn't."

2 Holidays and time off

Make sure it covers:

- ✓ How holiday is requested and approved
- ✓ Notice requirements
- ✓ Busy periods/peak restrictions if you use them
- ✓ Carry over rules and what happens at year end
- ✓ Time off for appointments and dependants and how to request it

Why it matters: As soon as summer approaches, holiday becomes a pressure point—especially in teams where cover is limited.

3 Conduct and disciplinary

Reality check the wording:

- ✓ Is the process clear and workable for your size of business?
- ✓ Does it reflect what you actually do, step by step?
- ✓ Are expectations timekeeping, behaviour, use of company property, etc. clearly stated?

Why it matters: When something goes wrong, you don't want to be improvising. A clear, fair process protects both employees and the employer.

4 Performance management

This is often missing or vague. A useful handbook should explain:

- ✓ How performance concerns are raised informal first, where appropriate
- ✓ How goals and timeframes are set
- ✓ How support/training is considered
- ✓ How progress is reviewed and documented

Why it matters: Performance issues don't fix themselves. A simple, fair process reduces uncertainty and helps managers act early.

5 Grievances employee concerns

Check that employees know:

- ✓ Who to raise issues with
- ✓ What happens after a concern is raised
- ✓ That issues will be handled confidentially where possible
- ✓ Expected timelines even if approximate

Why it matters: If employees don't trust the process, they may go straight to resignation, conflict, or external escalation.

Step 3: Make sure your handbook matches how you manage people day-to-day

This is the most important "spring clean" check.

Ask:

- ✓ Do managers follow these processes in practice?
- ✓ Are there any "unofficial rules" that contradict the handbook?
- ✓ Do employees know where to find the handbook and what's in it?
- ✓ Are you making exceptions, if so, are they fair and documented?

If your handbook says one thing but your managers do another, you're exposed. Consistency is what creates credibility.

Step 4: Update working practices that have changed even if the law hasn't

Even without changes to employment law, handbooks often fall behind because the business has changed.

Common updates for SMEs include:

- ✓ Hybrid or flexible working expectations
- ✓ Use of personal phones/devices for work
- ✓ Social media and public-facing conduct
- ✓ Data protection/confidentiality in a more digital workplace
- ✓ Expenses, mileage, and travel expectations
- ✓ Onboarding and probation processes

If you've changed how you operate, your handbook should reflect it, otherwise employees are left guessing.

Step 5: Remove "generic template" language that doesn't fit your business

A handbook can be technically fine and still not be useful.

Watch out for:

- Overly legalistic wording employees don't understand
- Policies that are unrealistic for a 5–50 person team
- Steps that require roles you don't have e.g., "HR department will…"
- Vague statements without clear responsibility "Management may…"

Aim for clarity, not complexity. A handbook should help managers act confidently and help employees know what to expect.

Step 6: Re-issue it properly so it lands

Once updated:

- ✓ Tell employees what has changed even a short summary
- ✓ Make sure everyone can access the latest version
- ✓ Consider a simple acknowledgement process so you can evidence it was shared

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✓ Brief managers on how to apply key policies consistently

A handbook is only effective if people know it exists and managers feel confident using it.

A simple spring clean checklist quick recap

If you want a fast review, run through this list:

✓ Version/date is clear and current

✓ Policies match how you operate today

✓ Sickness absence reporting is clear

✓ Holiday request rules are clear, including busy periods/carry-over

✓ Conduct/disciplinary process is practical and consistent

✓ Performance management process is explained simply

✓ Grievance process is clear and accessible

✓ Managers understand and apply the policies

✓ Employees know where the handbook is and what's changed

If you're unsure whether your handbook is still fit for purpose or you'd like it reviewed and refreshed so it reflects your business and reduces risk Tick HR can help. A structured handbook review can quickly identify gaps, tighten wording, and make sure your policies are workable for a growing team.

Share your current handbook and a quick overview of how you operate team size, working patterns, any recurring issues and we'll recommend what to update first.