

Cadets Turning 18

Fact - A young person turning 18 during a youth group or programme is considered a legal adult from their 18th birthday onwards. However, statutory safeguarding frameworks and organisational policies often continue to treat them as part of "youth provision" until the end of that programme or term, especially where care and risk management are concerned.

Legal and Safeguarding Context

- Under UK law, a "child" is defined as someone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday
- "Keeping Children Safe in Education", along with statutory youth protections, applies to everyone under 18. So processes continue up to the 18th birthday. Some institutions state "under-18 and on roll," meaning they may continue coverage into year 13 even if the individual turns 18 mid-year (mainly schools and education)
- Once someone turns 18, adult safeguarding regimes may apply but youth organisations often retain risk assessments, behaviour expectations, and supervision levels unchanged until term end.
- Statutory guidance emphasises that provisions should be responsive to the needs of young people, tailored to local circumstances, and flexible for e.g. ending membership/cohort affiliation at the natural "term boundary" rather than the exact birthday.

Recommended procedures include:

1. Programme End Date Override

- Rather than abruptly ending participation on the birthday, many groups allow YP to complete the ongoing term or season to avoid disruption.

2. Transition Options

- A cadet turning 18 may apply to become a Cadet Leader (adult volunteer). This role requires vetting, DBS checks, and training
- A recommended cooling-off period (often between three to twelve months) may be applied before starting the adult volunteer role to clearly mark the transition

3. Safeguarding Continuity

- Safeguarding standards (DBS, health forms, behaviour expectations, risk assessments) typically extend through the term-end, even past the 18th birthday, to ensure consistent oversight.

4. Clear Communication

- Units need to clarify policy in writing: when membership officially ends, what optional pathways exist, and the expectations for behaviour and roles post-birthday.

Good practice:

1. **Maintain cohort membership until term or season end**
If the VPC scheme runs by school term dates or seasonal programming, a turning-18 participant will usually remain in that cohort until the term finishes.
2. **Continue existing safeguarding and DBS/CRB arrangements**
Even after turning 18, the same enhanced DBS and safeguarding procedures typically stay in force until formal exit from the VPC
3. **Prepare transition to adult roles**
The young person may transition to an adult volunteer or leader role, assuming they meet relevant requirements, often with training during the same term.
4. **Organisational policy alignment**
Groups permit flexibility in age transitions but always document decisions transparently and in consultation with parents/guardians
5. **Clarify status to participants and staff**
Forces should be clear from their policy whether individuals who turn 18 mid-term are immediately in a different category (e.g. adult leader) or continue to be “youth members” until end of fixed cycle.

Key Risks to be aware of when allowing Over-18s to Remain in Youth Groups

1. Safeguarding Conflicts

- **Legal status shift:** A young person is legally an adult at 18. Safeguarding arrangements for adults differ from those for children.
- **Peer risk:** Over-18s may be perceived (or act) as having power over younger peers, especially in mixed-age settings (13–17).
- **Boundary issues:** Risk of inappropriate relationships (romantic, coercive, or exploitative) developing between an over-18 and under-18s.

2. Vulnerable Group Mixing

- Youth groups often include vulnerable minors with additional safeguarding needs (e.g. learning difficulties, trauma history).
- The presence of an adult peer may compromise their sense of safety, especially if supervision isn't strict.

Failing to adapt safeguarding or DBS arrangements for the 18+ individual could leave the organisation non-compliant or liable.

4. Insurance and Liability Gaps

- Group insurance may only cover under-18s as participants.
- If an over-18 causes or is harmed in an incident, your public liability insurance may not apply.

5. Reputational Damage

- Allegations involving a legal adult and a minor can severely damage public trust—even if unproven.
- Media/public perception may frame this as failure to separate children from adults **inappropriately**.

6. Consent and Confidentiality Confusion

- Adults have the right to make decisions independently, but youth settings usually involve parental consent and safeguarding disclosure rules.
- Holding different rules for one 18-year-old among minors creates confusion and potential breaches.

Mitigation Strategies (If Retaining 18-Year-Olds Briefly)

If you choose to permit temporary continuation post-18, consider the following controls:

Measure	Purpose
Clear, time-limited policy (e.g. “until end of term”)	Avoids indefinite exceptions
Treat as adult under safeguarding	Apply adult safeguarding protocols and risk assessments
Separate sleeping/bathroom facilities (on trips)	Reduces safeguarding risk
Supervision and role clarity	No leadership, mentoring, or private interaction with minors
Enhanced DBS check (if continued involvement as a leader is expected)	Covers adult roles
Signed agreement of conduct boundaries	Protects all parties and provides transparency