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Britain adds machine-readable checks to its digital identity register

The government says the upgrade will help alcohol retailers and public authorities verify approved providers at scale by winter 2026

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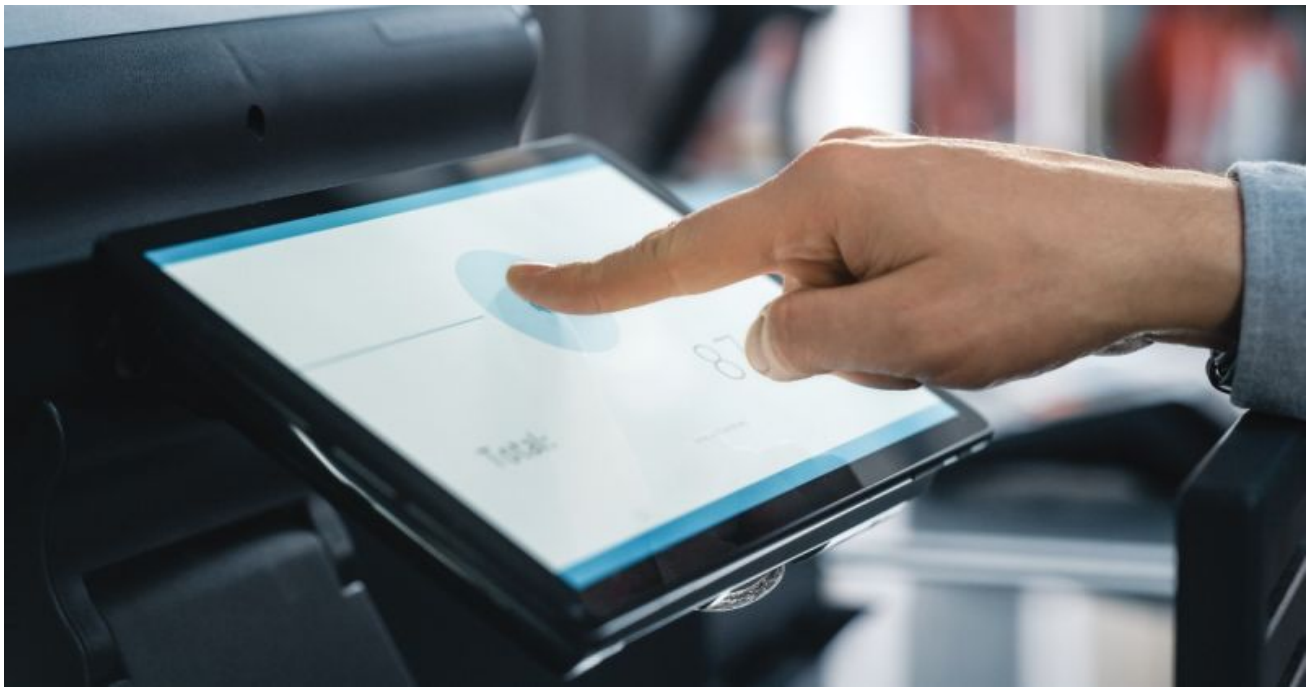

The British government said it is adding machine-readable technology to its digital verification services register, a change meant to let businesses and public authorities confirm at scale whether a digital identity provider is officially registered and can be trusted.

The plan was outlined by the Office for Digital Identities and Attributes, or OfDIA, in a government blog post published Thursday. The office said it has begun a beta development phase this month and expects testing to continue through the summer and fall of 2026, with a minimum viable product targeted for winter 2026.

The register already exists on GOV.UK as a list of digital verification services that meet government rules and standards. According to OfDIA, the current version works for occasional manual checks by people searching or browsing the list. But as digital identity tools spread more widely, the office said the system needs to support faster and more secure checks on a larger scale.

To do that, the government is implementing public key infrastructure, or PKI, so that checks can be carried out programmatically rather than by staff looking up providers one by one. OfDIA said that would allow both businesses and public bodies to verify registered services securely and at scale.

The move has direct relevance for alcohol sales in England and Wales. Last week, the Home Office laid regulations that would allow licensed premises to rely on digital age verification checks. Once those rules take effect, consumers will be able to prove they are old enough to buy alcohol through a registered digital verification service instead of showing a passport or driver’s license.

That shift could matter across the drinks trade, from supermarkets and convenience stores to pubs, clubs and restaurants, because staff would still need confidence that the digital proof of age presented at the point of sale comes from an approved provider. A machine-readable register could reduce the need for manual checks, ease operational pressure on frontline staff and support compliance when alcohol retailers decide whether to accept digital credentials.

OfDIA said relying on a person to check the register during each transaction would not be practical. Under the model described by the office, a customer buying alcohol could present proof of age through one digital verification service, while store staff use another service to scan it. That scan would then check against the machine-readable register whether the provider is officially registered. If confirmed, the sale could proceed within seconds.

The government also tied the project to broader plans for data sharing under the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025. Earlier this year, officials said information gateway powers in that law would allow public authorities to share data with trusted digital verification service providers at an individual’s request. Before any authority such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency or the Home Office shares data, however, it must first confirm that the requesting service is registered.

OfDIA said a machine-readable register would make those checks practical at volume. In its example, an individual creates a digital credential using a verification service and enters details such as name and date of birth. The person then agrees to share that information with a public authority so it can be validated against government records. The authority checks the register programmatically, confirms that the service is registered and then shares data needed for validation. The result is a trusted digital credential that could be used across different parts of the economy instead of a physical document.

Officials presented the project as part of an effort to expand the digital identity sector while keeping controls in place around trust and registration. The office said it will work during beta testing with digital verification service providers, businesses that rely on identity checks and public authorities to test and improve the system before launch.

For hospitality operators and drinks retailers, much will depend on how quickly the technology is adopted by approved providers and integrated into checkout systems, scanning tools and staff procedures. But if implementation goes as planned, businesses selling beer, wine and spirits in England and Wales may soon have a faster way to verify digital proof of age while reducing friction at the counter.