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Digital age checks will not stop alcohol ID fraud in England and Wales

Retailers may curb fake cards if they verify trusted credentials, since screenshots, weak apps and AI-edited documents remain vulnerable

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The move toward digital proof of age in alcohol sales in England and Wales is expected to change how retailers verify customers, but it is unlikely to end identity fraud on its own. For stores, bars, wine merchants, and delivery services, the shift could reduce some of the problems linked to physical fake IDs while opening the door to new risks tied to AI-generated or digitally altered documents.

The change matters because age checks are a routine part of alcohol sales, especially for businesses that serve younger customers or operate online. Physical documents such as driving licenses have long been the main form of proof, and fake or borrowed cards have been a familiar problem for staff. Digital systems promise a faster and more standardized process. They may also give retailers tools to authenticate credentials in real time instead of relying only on a visual inspection at the counter.

At the same time, fraud specialists say the threat is changing rather than disappearing. New research released by Finovox, a company that sells fraud-detection technology, found that 11% of Britons said they had committed document fraud. The company said 67% of respondents identified AI as one of the main factors making fraud easier. Among those who said they had committed document fraud, 82% said they had succeeded. Finovox said driving licenses were among the documents being falsified.

Those figures suggest the issue is already broad, but they should be read with caution. The materials reviewed did not include the survey’s sample size, fieldwork dates, or full methodology. The company’s findings also cover document fraud in general, not only attempts to buy alcohol. Even so, the research points to a concern that retailers are already facing across several sectors: a growing number of people can access AI tools that make forged or manipulated identity documents look more convincing.

For alcohol sellers, that means digital proof of age could solve some problems while creating others. A digital credential issued and verified through a secure system is harder to copy than a low-quality plastic fake or a printed image of a license. If a merchant can confirm that the data comes from a trusted source and has not been altered, the system may offer better protection than a quick visual check by a cashier on a busy shift.

But the level of protection depends on how the check is carried out. If businesses accept screenshots, images stored on a phone, or documents shown through unverified apps, the risk can remain high. AI tools can now edit photos, change dates of birth, alter text, and create realistic-looking identity records with little technical skill. In that environment, a weak digital process may simply replace one type of fake ID with a more polished digital version.

That risk is likely to be greatest in settings where age checks happen quickly or remotely. Home delivery drivers, self-checkout stations, temporary event staff, and small independent retailers may not have the same systems or training as larger chains. If digital proof of age becomes more common, businesses will need to know which credentials they can trust, how to spot warning signs, and when to refuse a sale. The pressure on staff may increase, not fall, if they are expected to judge both physical documents and digital ones without clear guidance.

The issue also goes beyond underage buying. Alcohol retailers increasingly operate across in-store, click-and-collect, and delivery channels. That means a customer may verify an age once online and then complete the purchase elsewhere. If there is a weakness at any stage, fraud can still get through. A reliable framework would require consistent checks across those steps, along with secure handling of personal data.

Fraud specialists say the most effective systems are likely to combine several layers of verification rather than rely on a single image or document. These can include validation against trusted issuers, device checks, liveness tests, and systems that detect signs of digital manipulation. Retailers will also have to balance stronger controls with speed and ease of use. If checks are too slow or confusing, customers may abandon purchases or staff may bypass the process.

The planned use of digital proof of age in England and Wales comes at a time when governments and businesses are trying to modernize identity checks without weakening safeguards. Supporters of digital credentials say they can make age verification more accurate and more convenient, especially for younger adults who are used to handling tickets, payments, and travel documents on their phones. Critics warn that new technology can create a false sense of security if the system behind it is not robust.

For the drinks trade, the practical question is not whether technology will reshape age verification, but what kind of fraud it will leave behind. Traditional fake IDs may become less useful if secure digital credentials are widely adopted and properly checked. But if businesses rely on simple on-screen displays or poorly protected apps, fraud is likely to adapt. In that case, AI would not remove the old problem so much as move it into a

new form, where forged identities are harder to detect with the naked eye.

That leaves retailers facing a familiar challenge in a new format. The sale still depends on one basic decision made in a few seconds: whether the person in front of the seller is old enough and whether the proof offered can be trusted. As digital proof of age reaches alcohol sales in England and Wales, the answer will depend less on whether an ID is shown on plastic or on a phone screen and more on whether the system behind it can withstand increasingly sophisticated fraud.