



POST-BAN VAPE COMPLIANCE A SERVE LEGAL COMPLIANCE REPORT

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Age-restricted sales compliance for e-cigarettes and vape products, before and after the June 2025 single-use vape ban.

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Introduction

2025 was a defining year for the vape industry as it was the year the single-use (disposable) vape ban came into effect. From June 2025, single-use vapes were banned from the shelves of all shops and it became illegal for retailers to sell them. The crackdown was driven by a combination of concerns: the attraction of vapes to young people (particularly sweet flavours and bright packaging), underage access, and the environmental impact caused by widespread littering of disposable devices. The aim was not only to reduce youth uptake, but also to encourage users towards alternatives, while tightening control over who could access vaping products.

Serve Legal conducts over 250,000 audits every year, creating millions of data points that show how age-restricted sales perform in the real world. These insights go far beyond a single pass rate figure. They reveal patterns by channel, location, product type, and point-of-sale environment, and they show where compliance is improving—and where it remains weak.

Serve Legal and Our Audits

Serve Legal was founded in 2006 after our founders experienced the real consequences of failed age-checking first-hand. Following a number of Trading Standards test purchase stings, they lost their licence and needed a safer, more reliable way to stress test whether staff were consistently following age verification policies in their pub. What began as a practical solution to protect a single business has since grown into a national and international compliance capability.

Nearly 20 years later, Serve Legal is the market leader in age verification compliance auditing across the UK and Ireland. We also deliver a broad range of mystery shopping and audit programmes across retail, hospitality, education, finance, place-making and leisure. Today, we operate in 27 countries across 6 continents, delivering more than a quarter of a million visits each year.

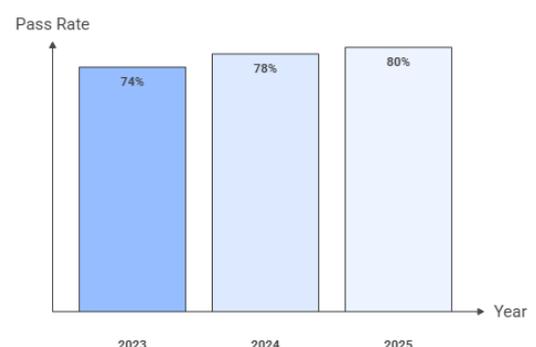
As we work across multiple industries and audit types, pass metrics can vary by client and programme. Some visits, particularly mystery shopping, may use scoring frameworks that generate percentage-based outcomes against a client’s own service standards. However, age verification compliance audits are typically measured against a clear, standardised outcome: whether the retailer followed the required process to prevent illegal sales.

For age verification compliance, we use a trained nationwide team of 18–19-year-old auditors to conduct compliant stress tests. Auditors attempt to purchase an age-restricted product and record the sales journey in detail, with particular focus on whether identification was requested and whether it was assessed properly during the transaction. Our auditors are legally of age to ensure these audits are fully compliant and safeguarded. No underage person gains access to age-restricted products, yet by using trained 18–19-year-old auditors we still deliver a realistic, robust test of Challenge 21/25 policies—a pledge that no one else in our industry can match. This allows businesses to identify weaknesses early and strengthen controls before external enforcement activity exposes shortfalls.

Category trend: e-Cigarette Compliance is Improving

Across the category, e-cigarette compliance improved steadily across the last three years. Pass rates increased from 74% in 2023, to 78% in 2024, reaching 80% in 2025. This improvement suggests that the category is becoming better controlled over time, likely reflecting stronger retailer focus, clearer staff training, and increased awareness of the consequences of underage sales.

The important caveat is that “improving” does not mean “low risk.” At 80%, there is still a meaningful failure rate in an age-restricted category, and those failures are rarely evenly spread. Averages can look reassuring while specific channels, regions, or store formats remain consistently weak.



E-Cigarette Compliance Pass Rates (2023-2025)

That is why this report focuses on where compliance diverges and what that divergence implies for retailers managing legal exposure, enforcement risk, and reputational harm.

Disposable vs Refillable

In the period leading up to the ban, disposable products showed stronger compliance than refillable e-cigarettes. The 2024–25 audit data indicates that disposable vape pass rates were considerably higher than refillable e-cigarettes, and by March 2025, disposable vapes recorded a pass rate of 87%, which was 9 percentage points higher than refillable e-cigarette audits in the same month.

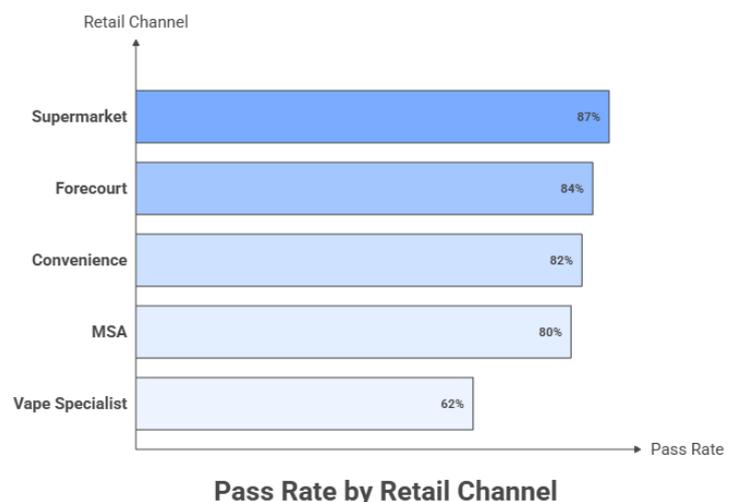
This gap is consistent with how perceived risk and scrutiny influence staff behaviour. Disposable vapes were widely discussed as being particularly youth-attractive, with bright packaging, sweet flavour choices, and marketing cues that raised concerns about underage appeal. In practice, when staff expect scrutiny, they tend to behave more defensively: they ask for ID more consistently, refuse more often, and are less likely to “take a chance” on a borderline sale.

The June 2025 ban changes what matters most going forward. With disposables removed from legal sale, the compliance risk does not disappear; it shifts to the products that remain widely available and routinely sold—especially refillable e-cigarette products. That makes refillable compliance the most relevant lens for the current landscape.

Performance by Retail Channel

The 2025 year-to-date results show clear differences by retail channel. Supermarkets recorded the strongest performance at 87%, a result that is both high and supported by a large sample size. This points to stronger systemic controls: clearer Challenge prompts, more consistent training, and structured oversight that makes it harder for individual staff behaviour to drift unnoticed.

Forecourts recorded 84% and Convenience stores recorded 82%, which is a decent performance but still indicates a meaningful failure rate. These environments tend to face different pressures to supermarkets: fewer staff on shift, higher reliance on



lone working, and more frequent repeat customers—all of which can weaken consistency if ID policies aren't actively reinforced.

Motorway Service Areas (MSAs) recorded 80%, which is broadly in line with the overall picture but still indicates risk, particularly in high-footfall, time-pressured settings where speed of service is prioritised.

The strongest risk signal in the channel data is vape specialists. Vape specialists recorded a pass rate of only 62%. This is the kind of result that suggests unreliable or insufficient enforcement: reliance on judgement, familiarity with repeat customers, commercial momentum during assisted selling, or inconsistent application of the same policy from one staff member to the next.

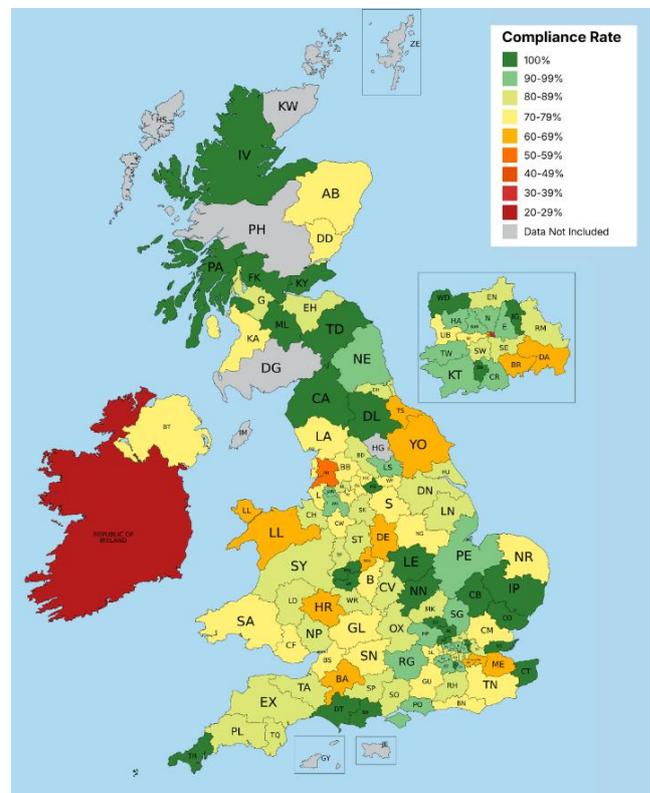
While not every retailer has the advantages supermarkets often do, such as large teams, dedicated security, and well-funded training, there are still practical steps any business can implement. Regular staff refreshers (even if delivered internally), routine stress tests and audits, and clear Challenge 25 prompts such as posters, badges, and till signage all help reinforce expectations, support staff confidence, and signal to customers that underage sales will not be tolerated.

Geographic Variation in Refillable e-Cigarette Compliance

Geography remains a significant driver of compliance variation in vape sales. Serve Legal's audit results show that location can predict risk as clearly as channel or product type and Ireland is the most consistent outlier, with performance significantly lower than elsewhere.

Recent enforcement reporting reflects that wider picture: in January 2026, Tobacco Reporter reported that more than 22% of vape shops inspected in Ireland were found selling vaping products to under-18s, citing figures from the Health Service Executive (HSE) and noting that the under-18 sales ban has been in place since December 2023.

Serve Legal's own data reinforces the scale and persistence of the challenge. From 2023 to 2025, both disposable and refillable e-cigarette pass rates in Ireland have typically sat between 20–27%, indicating weakness



that goes well beyond isolated store errors. Results at this level usually point to systemic issues, such as inconsistent ID-checking culture, weaker operational controls, or a lower perceived likelihood of consequences when policy isn't followed.

Within Great Britain, the picture is less about a single national pattern and more about extreme local differences. In 2025, disposable vape pass rates fell as low as 33% in one postcode, demonstrating that in certain areas the likelihood of an underage sale can be dramatically higher than the national average. Several locations also underperformed materially, with Manchester, Sheffield, Lincoln and Walsall recording results 16% lower than the country's average for disposable vape compliance. That gap is operationally meaningful: it suggests that even when a retailer's headline performance looks acceptable, there can be specific regional clusters where controls are failing far more frequently.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are clear examples of what "good" looks like when expectations are consistent and enforced. In 2025, areas including Uxbridge, Wakefield, Bradford, Harrow, Darlington, Bournemouth, Dorchester and Watford recorded 100% compliance across the year, meaning that in those locations auditors were unable to purchase a disposable vape without legitimate identification. These results demonstrate that high performance is achievable and sustainable, and they reinforce an important point: weak compliance is not inevitable. The same country can produce both near-perfect outcomes and high-risk failures depending on local store culture, management focus, and how firmly ID policies are applied day-to-day.

Taken together, the geographic data makes a practical argument for targeted action. Averages are useful for tracking progress, but they are not enough for risk management. The highest-value interventions will be those that identify and prioritise underperforming areas, learn from the regions achieving 100% compliance, and apply those operational controls consistently—especially as the market shifts further towards refillable products in the post-ban landscape.

Conclusion

The disposable vape ban in June 2025 was designed to reduce youth appeal, limit underage access, and curb the environmental harm caused by single-use devices. Serve Legal's audit data shows that overall e-cigarette compliance has improved across the last three years, rising from 74% in 2023 to 80% in 2025. That progress matters—but it is not the full story.

What the data makes clear is that compliance is not evenly distributed, and the greatest risk is concentrated in predictable places. Refillable e-cigarette products now sit at the centre of the post-ban landscape, and the map-based data shows that performance varies sharply by region. Channel performance also diverges significantly, with

supermarkets performing strongly while vape specialists lag well behind, indicating that even in environments that specialise in vape sales, consistent age-checking cannot be assumed. The point-of-sale environment further influences outcomes, with normal tills showing weaker performance than kiosk and main bank tills, likely reflecting higher pressure and distraction.

The key lesson from 2025 is that regulation alone does not guarantee effective control at the counter. Strong compliance is achievable—some areas demonstrate that clearly—but it requires consistent ID culture, clear expectations, and active management reinforcement. As the category shifts away from disposables and towards refillable products, the retailers and regions that treat refillable sales as routine will be where underage access risk is most likely to persist. The organisations that improve fastest will be those that use audit data to target their weakest channels, highest-risk store environments, and low-performing regions—then retest regularly to prove change, not assume it.

Get in Touch with Serve Legal

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Explore our Age Verification services: www.servelegal.co.uk/services/age-verification-test-purchasing-services

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