



Illegal Tobacco and Vapes Reference Guide For Communities

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action on smoking and health

Overview

Illegal tobacco and vape products are those that fall outside of the laws set by the UK Government. These laws exist to protect public health, ensure product safety and stop tax evasion. Products that don't meet these standards are illegal, no matter how they're packaged or where they're sold.

Illegal Tobacco

Tobacco is illegal to sell in the UK if it fits any of the following categories:

Counterfeit: Fake versions of well-known brands. These products are unauthorised and untaxed. Packaging may look convincing but often has printing errors, spelling mistakes, or poor-quality finishes.

Smuggled: Genuine tobacco products brought into the UK without UK duty paid. These are often marked for sale in other countries and may carry foreign health warnings or tax stamps.

Illicit whites: Brands manufactured specifically for the illegal market. These are not legally sold anywhere and are commonly linked to organised crime. Examples include Jin Ling, Raquel, Fest, and Marble.

Loose tobacco: Hand-rolling tobacco sold in unbranded bags, clingfilm, wrap, or pouches. Any tobacco sold without proper labelling, health warnings and traceability is illegal.

Single cigarettes: It is illegal in the UK to sell individual cigarettes. All cigarettes must be sold in plain packs of at least 20. Selling singles is a common way of targeting young people or people on low incomes.

Illegal Vapes

A vape is illegal to sell in the UK if any of the following apply:

- It is a **single-use (disposable)** vape
- It contains more than **2 millilitres of e-liquid** in a single tank or pod
- It has a **nicotine strength** above **20mg per millilitre (2%)**
- It **does not carry** the required **nicotine health warning**, covering **30% of both the front and back** of the outer packaging
- It does not show a UK or EU-based manufacturer or importer name and address
- It has not been notified to and listed by the MHRA

Vapes made for non-UK markets are illegal to sell in the UK if they do not meet UK packaging, labelling, and notification rules. This includes missing health warnings, foreign-language packaging, **or no UK or EU importer listed**.

How to Spot Illegal Products

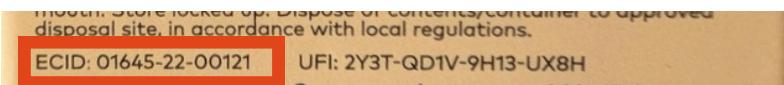
Key Visual Indicators: Vapes

- Very high puff counts, such as 1500, 3500 or 10000
- Nicotine strengths above 20mg, including labels such as 3%, 5% or 50mg
- Missing or unclear nicotine health warnings
- No UK or EU manufacturer or importer name and address on the packaging
- Foreign-language packaging or instructions
- Fake or non-working security features, such as holograms or QR codes that do not scan
- Very low prices compared to typical retail

Since 1st June 2025, single-use disposable vapes are illegal to sell in the UK. If a vape is pre-filled and designed to be thrown away, it should be treated as illegal, even if it is labelled as reusable.

MHRA Registration

All legal vapes sold in the UK must be registered with the MHRA and carry an ECID number on the packaging. Youth workers are not expected to check this routinely, but if a product has no ECID number or does not appear on the MHRA list, it should be treated as a concern.



Health Warnings Vapes

All nicotine vapes sold legally in the UK must display this exact sentence on the outer packaging: **“This product contains nicotine which is a highly addictive substance.”**

This warning must:

- Appear on both the front and the back of the outer packaging
- Cover 30% of the front and 30% of the back
- Be clearly visible and easy to read



Key Visual Indicators: Tobacco

- Single cigarettes sold individually
- Loose tobacco sold in plastic bags, clingfilm or unlabelled pouches
- Foreign-language health warnings on the packaging
- No UK duty-paid tax stamp on the pack
- Pack sizes other than 20 cigarettes
- Colourful, shiny or branded packaging
- Misspelt brand names or poor print quality
- Descriptors such as “light”, “mild” or “low tar”

If tobacco does not appear in plain packaging with large picture health warnings in English, it is unlikely to be legal UK stock.

Health Warnings Tobacco Products

Tobacco sold legally in the UK must carry approved picture and text health warnings chosen from a government-set list. These include warnings about lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, pregnancy, and second-hand smoke.

For a tobacco pack to be legal:

- The health warning must cover 65% of both the front and the back of the pack
- The warning must include both an image and text
- The warning text must be in English only
- The pack must be plain olive green in colour, with no branding, logos, shine, or decoration

If a tobacco pack does not look heavily covered by health warnings, it is very unlikely to be legal UK stock.



Key Indicators a Shop Might Be Selling?

Illegal tobacco and vape sales often happen in ordinary places young people already spend time around.

- Products being sold from behind the counter, under the counter, or from back rooms, rather than openly displayed
- Very cheap prices that young people talk about as being “too good to be true”
- Young people being served without age checks, or being known by name by staff despite being under 18
- Sales happening quickly or discreetly, with items passed over without being scanned
- Shops that mainly sell non-perishable goods, such as phone accessories, household items or electronics, but also supply vapes or tobacco on request
- People being directed elsewhere, such as “come back later”, “ask out the back”, or being told to message someone instead

Some sales don't happen in shops at all. You may hear young people mention:

- Buying vapes or tobacco from homes, cars, or delivery drop-offs
- Meeting sellers at agreed spots rather than going into a shop
- Products being arranged through social media, group chats or direct messages, then collected in person

These patterns are common in illegal sales and often rely on word of mouth. Young people may see this as normal or low risk.

If a setting feels secretive, unusually relaxed about age, or centred on cheap and fast transactions, it may be linked to illegal supply.



Links to Organised Crime

The sale of illegal tobacco and vapes is rarely just a local issue. It is often connected to wider criminal networks that operate across towns, regions, and countries. These networks focus on profit and use illegal products because the risks are lower than other criminal activity.

How It Works?

- Products are brought into the country or moved around in bulk
- Stock is passed through middle sellers
- Sales happen locally through shops, homes, vehicles, or social media

Many sellers on the ground are not the ones making the money. They may be under pressure or working for others higher up the chain.

How People Are Exploited?

People involved in illegal tobacco and vape sales may be experiencing exploitation:

- Working very long hours for little or no pay
- Being told where to live, work, or sleep
- Having identity documents taken away
- Being threatened with violence, debt, or reporting to authorities
- Being watched or supervised constantly
- Not being allowed to leave the role

In some cases, workers have been found:

- Sleeping in shops or storage rooms
- Living in overcrowded or unsafe accommodation
- Being moved between locations with little notice

Risks for Young People

Young people may be:

- Asked to carry products or money
- Used to pass messages or act as lookouts
- Offered free vapes or cash to help with deliveries
- Pressured to stay quiet or “mind their business”

What starts as a small favour can quickly turn into pressure, debt, or fear. If a young person talks about being asked to help, feeling pressured, or being frightened of saying no, this should be treated as a safeguarding concern.

For some young people, illegal products feel normal or easier to access than legal ones. Understanding the wider picture can help challenge that without blaming or shaming.

Upcoming Law Changes

There are significant legislative changes ahead aimed at reducing tobacco use and regulating vaping products in the UK.

Ban on Single-Use Vapes

Since 1st June 2025 single-use disposable vapes are illegal to sell in the UK.

Sellers may try to move stock quickly, label disposables as refillable, or continue selling quietly. Young people may talk about disposables becoming harder to find, cheaper, or being sold “under the counter”.

If a vape is still pre-filled and disposable after this date, it should be treated as illegal.

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill

The UK Government's Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which will come into force in stages, will:

- Make it illegal to sell tobacco to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009, gradually phasing out tobacco sales for future generations.
- Tighten rules on vape packaging, flavours and display to make them less appealing to children.
- Improve rules around nicotine pouches and other novel nicotine products
- Strengthen enforcement powers for Trading Standards across Wales.

These measures are part of the shared goal of creating a smoke-free Wales by 2030.



What to Do and How to Report

No Ifs. No Butts. is the Wales-wide reporting system for illegal tobacco, vapes, cannabis, and other nicotine products. Since 2022, we have received over 1,400 reports across the UK. Reports made through this system go directly to Trading Standards.

What Should Be Reported?

A report can be made if a young person talks about, or you become aware of:

- Underage sales of tobacco, vapes, or nicotine products
- Illegal vapes, including disposable vapes
- Cannabis, including THC vapes and edibles
- Synthetic cannabinoids, such as Spice
- Other nicotine products being sold or given to young people
- Products that appear unsafe

This includes products sold through shops, homes, cars, delivery drop-offs, or arranged through social media or messaging apps.

Reports do not need to be detailed to be useful. Even small bits of information can help build a wider picture and protect young people.

If a Young Person Talks About Finding, Buying, or Using Products

Listen without judgement and focus on safety rather than rules. Avoid asking for names or exact locations in group settings. If what they describe raises concern, it is appropriate to report it.

Do NOT open or tamper with the device. If someone is unwell or appears at immediate risk, call 999 immediately.

How To Report?

noifs-nobutts.co.uk/report

Reports can be made to No Ifs. No Butts anonymously and without giving personal details.

Information shared through this system goes **directly to Trading Standards for assessment and action**.

