THE NATURAL FIBRE COMPANY

Customer Guidance Notes

Introduction

These notes aim to help customers make the best use of our services. We also advise talking to others and to us about what you want. We are happy to show you around and give references from customers with similar fleeces and/or requirements.

It is important to have an idea of what you intend to make with your yarn and how you intend to sell it.
As processing is quite technical, you may also find it helpful to look at our website Process page, download our information sheets and view our films to see how fibre is processed.

Our Expertise

We have wide experience over many years spinning and dyeing all types of pure wools, mohair, alpaca, llama and camel and also of blending with silk, flax, etc.

- We start from the shorn fleeces, hand sort and grade them, then wash and dry them to remove dirt and grease.
- We then tease apart the fibre and can add other fibres to provide colour, softness, bulk or drape.
- We can produce carded fibre or tops for hand spinning and felting.
- We produce both worsted (combed) and woollen (carded) yarns, and can ply, steam and then finish in balls, skeins/hanks or on cones.
- We can also start from combed tops to make combed yarns.

We believe we are unique in the world in being able to offer this range of processes under a single roof.

Our specialisations

- We always try to work in harmony and respect with our environment, to further enhance the sustainability of natural fibres.
- For our minimum orders, we guarantee that the product returned will be made entirely from your fibre (unless of course you have asked us to add something!)
- All processing can be done to Global Organic Textile Standard if required, to maintain your organic status.
- We are particularly versatile and can offer turn-around times for pre-booked orders.
- We take all the time you need to listen and help you decide on the best products to make from your fleeces.

Fibre suitability

We know, because we do it too, that it takes a great deal of long-term effort to produce good quality fleeces and we care because we know it only comes off your animals once or twice a year and is therefore valuable.

However, to add further value, it is also important to understand that the quality of a fibre varies with the animal's breed, location, age and health, and even (!) the weather from year to year. It is not possible to be definitive about the fineness, softness, amount of kemp, etc. in advance and you will need to assess your fibre when it is shorn. We are always happy to review samples and discuss options with you.

British sheep breeds produce a wide range of wools, but the minority and rare breeds, as well as those reared mainly for meat, on average have a medium to coarse wool. Alpaca is more consistent as there are only two main types.

We always use our skills and experience to get the best results and yield, but we cannot do the impossible!

- Mohair can be spun as pure mohair if fine or from kids under a year old, but thereafter, depending on quality, it may only spin into a yarn if blended with 10-20% fine white wool
- Both the coarser, longer, lustre wools and some alpaca are not always suitable for spinning without blending with 10-20% carrier wool fibre
- Short fibres have lower yields
- Coloured fibres if mixed, like paints, have a tendency to blend to grey! Although the processing will enable the yarn to have specific character, the overall impact will be grey. Thus you should consider separating Jacob in particular or saving fibre from one year to another, blending or joining a producer group to obtain variety.

Preparing your fleeces for processing

- To help you to achieve the best you can from your flock, please download the free information sheets on Shearing and Fleece Quality, for wool and for alpaca, from our website.
- Please remember to keep your fibre cool and dry while you store it, and watch out for moths: hanging up in a cloth (duvet cover) or paper bag works best. Other nasties can make their homes in the fibre if you have not removed faeces and vegetation. If mildew or pests invade, remove the affected fibre and destroy – with luck, the remaining fibre should still be useable, possibly helped by 2 weeks in a freezer.

Processing

Please download the information sheet on our Processes from our website to understand the many stages required to transform your fleeces into yarn or other products. Customers are also welcome to visit, see around and look at products made from similar fibre.

When fleeces and orders arrive, we weigh in and review your fibre to assess whether the order is indeed the most appropriate product for you. Unless we think it needs changing, we then proceed with the order. If necessary we may contact you to discuss issues and advise on possible alternative options.

Own fibre and other options

We normally guarantee that if you supply the stipulated minimum weight of fleece you will receive processed fibre or yarn made almost entirely of your own fibre.

In practice we have to allow for a minimal passing-on of fibre between batches. This does still allow organic status to be preserved (where relevant) due to our strict cleaning regime for organic processing. If, after sorting, we do not have enough fibre to feel confident of fulfilling this commitment, we may recommend you to consider adding further purchased fibre, either to provide sufficient yield or to improve the average quality and suitability for processing.

If the dry weight after scouring is below 14kg and you do not wish to add, we make a surcharge to allow for the lower yield. You may prefer to pay for the work so far done and have the scoured fibre returned to save for future use. We will discuss this with you if we need to contact you to confirm or alter your order.

Yields from your fleeces: where does it go?

After sorting, where up to 10% may need to be rejected, the first process, scouring, will normally remove around 25% of the weight of wool as dirt and grease (less for mohair and alpaca).

The dry weight after scouring of our minimum incoming 25kg batch needs to be at least 15kg to ensure a quality result, so if the dry weight is below 15kg we will add some compatible fibre (breed, colour, quality) to make up the difference. If the dry weight is less than 15kg we will contact you to discuss options, which normally means adding suitable fibre from our stocks, for which we will make an additional charge.

For spinning, we then add back around 6-10% in a mix of water and oil to aid processing, and the remaining processes can remove anything between 10% (a reasonable average target) and 30% or more.

The average percentage yield on woollen spinning is around 65% but this falls with problematic fibres, or those containing a wide range of fibre types, to as low as only 30%. It is reasonable to assume a 60% yield on washed yarn.

Worsted spinning involves combing out short and coarse fibres so the yield will be lower than for woollen spinning, perhaps 50% for washed yarn. We are able to worsted spin most fibre types, but strongly advise that fibres with a shorter staple are woollen spun due to avoid exceedingly low yields.

Spun yarn returned to you in an oiled state will therefore lose around 6-10% further when finally washed. It is advisable (but not essential) to wash oiled yarn within six months as the oil may otherwise affect the yarn.

Yarn specifications

- For more technical information on yarn specifications and how they work, please see our free downloads on Yarn Specifications (How Long is a Ball of Wool) and Yarn weights.
- There are no definitive standards for yarn types (e.g. Aran or Double Knitting), so the way we aim to achieve repeatability is to work in Yorkshire Skein Weight (YSW) or New Metric (NM) for diameter and Twist per inch (TPI) or metric equivalent for twist.
- If you supply us with a 1-2 metre yarn sample, we can match it and of course for repeat orders we can use previous machine settings. We keep the records of all customer orders, together with a yarn sample, in order to help you in the future.

- Please note though, that a natural fibre yarn will feel and look different to an artificial fibre yarn of the same specification, as well as working entirely individually on each fibre. So we cannot match specifications from an artificial yarn.
- *Please note that all ball and skein weights are approximate due to the natural characteristics of the fibre. When making packages of stated weights, we aim to enable you to comply with trading standards.*
- Apart from yarns, we make scoured/teased fluff, scoured/carded fibre for spinning or felting (rovings), and tops.
- We can also sometimes make more than one product/output from a single batch: please ask!
- We are able to advise on dyeing and work with specialist dyers who do wool and smaller batches, including organic dyeing

Contamination – IMPORTANT WARNING

We cannot accept fibre containing chemicals potentially dangerous to health or the environment. All customers are required to sign a compliance statement undertaking that they have not used such chemicals within a four-month withdrawal period prior to shearing and your fibre will not be scheduled for processing until this statement arrives.

Customers are expected to remove contamination as far as possible before sending us fleece. We will reject fibre we consider too contaminated to process and we immediately destroy any fibre arriving with moths.

Weaving

If you decide you wish to make yarn for weaving, it is important to consult a weaver and for us to liaise with them. We can suggest weavers who may be suitable, or would be happy to work with anyone of your choice. We will then spin the yarn to their requirements.

We will invoice you for spinning and can send yarn direct to the weaver once payment is received. The same applies for machine knitting or dyeing.

You will require a minimum of 40 kilograms of fibre for suiting or fine scarves and 115 kilograms for blankets. Please see our advice note on weaving.

Time to return

Our busiest time is late summer and autumn. Due to demand, we now run a waiting list and call in orders in turn. So you need to be added to this list, and receive our sacks in which to package your yarn ready to send. We give estimates of the likely time to process and return when we confirm your order. There is usually about six months waiting and then processing orders is around 2-3 months, depending on specification, colour and final package.

It is worth considering shearing twice a year if you have a long wool sheep as this makes for easier processing and sometimes improves quality, while enabling you to process in the winter when the turn-around is quicker.

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Special information for organic producers and Herdwick and similar fleeces

We undertake special cleaning before organic spinning and after Herdwick and other coarse fleece processing, so we set specific dates for this type of processing.

The times of organic and Herdwick runs will be notified direct o all known customers. Those customers not able to supply the fibre and all required documentation in time may have to wait for the next run. Please contact us on this.

We cannot take responsibility for the maintenance of organic status outside our premises, so customers must assure themselves of the organic status of other processors such as weavers or dyers. If an organic batch is underweight, we will not add fibre as we do not carry organic stocks of fibre. Customers may choose to: have the fibre part-processed and returned until they have enough fibre for the next run, send us more fibre, or have the fibre processed at the lower weight in the knowledge that there will be a lower yield and higher cost.

Orders, prices, and cost savings you can consider

Please discuss blends and colours with us and we will do our best to advise you to enable you to produce a useful and saleable yarn.

Depending on the fibre, yarn (woollen or worsted) and finish you choose, as a rough guide you can expect to pay between £45-65 per finished kilogram (2.2 lbs) of undyed knitting yarn, including VAT and carriage. So a minimum order of 20kg, yielding on average 12-15kg finished yarn, is likely to cost between £500 and £1,000.

For weaving, check with the weaver! Depending on design you can roughly assume a cost of £1,700-2,400 or £35-48 per linear metre, to produce 50 metres of cloth, enough for 17-20 throws or over 100 scarves. Blankets cost much more though they can be cut down and stitched to specific sizes.

You can save by:

- Sorting colours in advance
- Skirting and grading will improve the percentage yield (we can advise on how to do this)
- Discounts are available for single batches of more than 40, 100 and 250 kilograms
- Washing skeins at home and winding into balls will save on paying us to do it
- Oiled on cone is good for machine knitting and the resulting garments can then be washed
- Ball and skein bands and labels can be designed and printed at home, instead of paying us to do it
- Making different yarn types each time you process with us, to build up a range over time, rather than paying split batch surcharges – most people start with the popular Double Knitting and develop from this baseline
- Joining with others to share a batch, thus reducing the outlay and enabling you to market test a smaller amount of product
- You may also find that it is a false economy not to dye white wool, as dyed colours sell more quickly, enabling you to recoup your costs earlier.

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Blacker Sheep Limited trading as The Natural Fibre Company, Blacker Yarns and Blacker Designs

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