“Our 10 Commitments set out the direction of travel for the solar farm industry, which is to deliver multiple benefits, not only for the climate, but for the British countryside. We want all our members to comply with these Commitments & we believe the whole industry should get behind these standards.”  Paul Barwell, CEO

Broad overview:
The STA represents many of the leading developers of solar farms in the UK. The solar farm industry is just 18 months old in the UK and capacity is still modest, anticipated at around 1.6GW by the end of March. The STA and its membership have been exceptionally proactive in defining and championing good practice in solar farms to ensure the UK industry proceeds on a sustainable footing. The responsible industry recognises that solar farms must be done well to retain high levels of public support for quality schemes. Good practice in the UK industry routinely avoids high-grade agricultural land (except in circumstances where local planners deem it can deliver greater benefits) and uses solar farms to boost British biodiversity, which is in serious decline. Solar farms typically use less than 5% of the land they are sited on for fixings, leaving 95% of the land still available for other uses. Far from being an ‘industrial’ development, solar farms can provide a cost-effective sanctuary for wildlife in the UK’s intensively-farmed rural landscape. Solar farms can readily combine with several existing agricultural uses and support farmers facing increasingly extreme weather risk, or on breadline incomes. Solar farms can also allow cost-effective resting of exhausted or high-carbon soils. Good schemes are well screened and often invisible. Media photos are usually taken from a helicopter and often present a misleading representation of visual impact. Solar enjoys unparallel public support at 85% & over 70% specifically on quality solar farms (see below).

Proactive Industry Leadership:
Last summer the STA published 10 Commitments it expects solar farm developers, builders or tenants who are members of the STA to comply with. These have been widely publicised across the industry and are publicly available here:
The 10 Commitments were welcomed by Energy Minister Greg Barker and by a wide range of key stakeholders in conservation and community energy including The National Trust, RSPB, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Forum for the Future, Plantlife, Co-operatives UK, Pure Leapfrog & The Bumblebee Trust. For example;

Patrick Begg, Rural Enterprises Director at the National Trust, said:
“New renewable sources, such as solar farms, are vital if we are to generate the low carbon, clean energy that we need to power the nation. However, it is essential that these schemes are realised in tune with landscapes and the natural environment and avoid our most sensitive and precious locations. So it’s hugely refreshing and heartening to see the industry making a robust commitment to best practice when it comes to locating, setting up and then managing solar farms. Even better, there are clear commitments here about leaving the host sites in better shape for wildlife, habitats and soil quality than when the project began.”

Dr Jonathan Scurlock, Chief NFU Adviser on Renewable Energy and Climate Change, a key stakeholder in developing the ‘10 Commitments’, said:
“Farmers are well-placed to capture renewable natural energy flows, while maintaining our traditional role in providing food together with other environmental and land management services. Growers and food processors have a long history of harnessing the power of the sun, and solar electricity clearly has a major role to play in modern agriculture. The NFU is delighted that lead solar developers have signed up to such a strong charter of good practice to deliver multiple benefits from the development of solar farms.”
British public back quality solar farms:
While some proposed schemes may attract legitimate complaints that should be addressed, local minority opposition to solar farms is often amplified by MPs and media opposed to the renewables industry, often alongside frustrating myths about solar farms. Solar routinely scores by far the highest approval ratings of all energy generation technologies in DECC’s opinion tracker at 85%. Subsequent tracker reports show this support retained. The STA commissioned its own YouGov poll specifically on solar farms. When asked specifically about support for solar farms, two thirds of people (67%) said they supported either ‘good quality’ or ‘all’ solar farms. The level of public support rose to 71% when the STA’s ‘10 Commitments’ were described. Only 5% of people said they oppose all solar farms when good quality solar farms were described. Nearly seven times more people would rather have a solar farm located near them than a gas fracking field when given four options to choose from. When asked to choose ONE local energy development as a preference to be cited nearby, by far the most popular choice was a solar farm at 40% of respondents. 25% chose a wind farm, 10% a nuclear power plant and just 6% shale gas fracking and boreholes.

Specific actions taken by the STA & NSC to promote good practice:
The industry has been working with the independent National Solar Centre and major conservation NGOs to define and champion best practice. We recognise that guidance from CLG is relatively thin as a result of Government streamlining. Detailed planning guidance has therefore been set out by the National Solar Centre. This guidance advocates a focus on land grade 3b, and below, and on brownfield sites. It promotes screening and care regarding cumulative impact in any given area. Even more detailed guidance is being prepared, for example on biodiversity where the STA and NSC are working with major conservation groups to define best practice in detail.

- STA published 10 Commitments to define good practice in the industry Summer 2013
- NSC sets out detailed planning guidance last year for large-scale ground-mounted solar publicly available at http://www.bre.co.uk/page.jsp?id=3202
- NSC ran 6 regional planners ‘road shows’ last November to disseminate best practice. Energy Minster Greg Barker invited planners to attend – over 150 attended the road shows.
- STA held a solar event in the Commons in December and invited all MPs to raise any concerns directly with the large-scale industry
- A further planning workshop will be held in Scotland in February.
- The STA, NSC, National Trust and other key stakeholders will launch detailed biodiversity guidance next month.

Conclusion: Support Responsible Solar Farms
The responsible industry recognises that solar farms can and must be done well and has been exceptionally proactive at defining and disseminating good practice. Quality developments depend on good local decisions by local planners, who are best placed to weigh up local considerations. While the STA would not seek to defend poor schemes, the solar industry has been concerned by negative political rhetoric on solar farms where this is unwarranted. Solar farms are cost-effective - the STA anticipates they will match (then beat) onshore wind and beat nuclear strike-prices by 2018/19, making solar the lowest cost major renewable power generator. The STA anticipates around 1.6GW of solar farm capacity by the end of March. The sector is severely constrained in many areas by grid availability, often limiting site selection. Registration with Ofgem runs around 9 months behind so it is not possible to obtain exact & timely official deployment figures, a situation the STA would like DECC to address. The STA is also concerned about the unlevel planning playing field for solar compared to shale gas fracking, which is actively promoted by Government and apparently permitted in AONB & National Parks.

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2 Total sample size was 2,068 UK adults aged 18+. Fieldwork was undertaken between 9th August to 12th August. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).