

AstraZeneca to close UK research centre with 1,200 job losses

. Move threatens to undermine UK as research leader . Innovation minister says Britain still attractive for pharmaceutical investment

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Drug firm AstraZeneca is to close a research centre in the UK with the loss of up to 1,200 jobs in a move that threatens to undermine the UK's position as a leader in pharmaceutical research and development.

The AstraZeneca site in Charnwood, near Loughborough in Leicestershire, will close next year. A smaller facility in Cambridge will also shut. The cuts are part of 8,000 worldwide job losses announced by the firm in January.

AstraZeneca is Loughborough's second-biggest employer after the local university. The 69-acre site specialises in research into finding medicines for respiratory diseases, such as asthma, chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

Linda McCulloch, the Unite union's national officer for the chemical and pharmaceutical industry, said: "This is a devastating blow to the workforce at Loughborough. The closure of this site will damage the UK's pharmaceutical research and development capabilities."

The innovation minister, Lord Drayson, said: "I'm obviously disappointed that AstraZeneca is closing Charnwood, but the announcement that Alderley Park will become one of AZ's top three global R&D sites shows that the UK remains an attractive location for investment in pharmaceuticals."

In recent years, the firm has spent an estimated £100m expanding the Loughborough site, which was set up by Fisons in 1993 and then bought by Swedish firm Astra two years later. Astra merged with the British-based Zeneca Group in 1999.

In a statement, the firm said: "The proposed changes, first outlined at the end of January, include focusing research efforts on a smaller number of disease areas and consolidating activities on to a reduced global footprint through the merger of some sites."

The company said it was also interested in selling its Arrow Therapeutics business, which occupies a small facility in London.

In other changes, the firm said pharmaceutical development work at the Avlon facility near Bristol will end, with some roles transferring to Macclesfield or Alderley Park in Cheshire.

largest UK R&D site, will increase as employees transfer from other sites. A total of 3,500 R&D jobs will be cut across the world, including the UK, Sweden and the US.

Anders Ekblom, executive vice president of development at AstraZeneca, said: "We have made real strides in improving our efficiency in recent years, but there is a continuing need to adapt our organisation in anticipation of future challenges. These proposed changes will help us create a more focused, innovative and productive company. I am also acutely aware that these proposed changes will have a significant impact on our people and we are committed to providing support to them."

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