

Teacher who lost voice trying to make herself heard awarded £150,000

Hillingdon council agrees out-of-court settlement with Joyce Walters over damage to vocal chords caused by playtime noise *Rachel Williams 9 November 2010*

A teacher of English whose voice was permanently damaged as she struggled to make herself heard in the classroom has been awarded more than £150,000 in compensation.

Joyce Walters had to give up teaching after developing nodules on her vocal chords, which she blamed on the noise outside Harlington adult education centre in Hillingdon, north-west London. She says she can still only speak for a short period before her throat becomes sore and her voice hoarse, despite months of speech therapy.

The 50-year-old, who has received the six-figure sum – thought to be one of the biggest payouts received by a teacher – through two out-of-court settlements agreed by Hillingdon council, started to teach English to foreign students at the centre in 2005. She was given a classroom next to a courtyard used by schoolchildren during playtimes, and says she often had to repeat herself and raise her voice to be heard over the noise and disruption.

Within a month, she claims, she had a sore throat, which got progressively worse. Her problems were compounded by the fact that, because many of her students were beginners, clear pronunciation was vital.

The vocal chord nodules were discovered through exploratory surgery. She claims she repeatedly asked for help from her bosses at the centre but nothing was done.

After taking the council to a disability discrimination employment tribunal, she was awarded an out-of-court settlement of £11,000; a second settlement, of £145,000, was agreed in July following a separate personal injury claim.

"Teaching was my calling. I adored the classroom and miss it so much, but the problems with my voice make it impossible for me to ever go back," Walters said.

"I even have to think twice about day-to-day things, like speaking on the phone to my dad in Scotland, as my voice is not strong enough to maintain a conversation for any length of time."

Joanne Jefferies, an expert in workplace injuries at the law firm Irwin Mitchell, which represented Walters, said: "Despite numerous attempts to raise her concerns with her employer, Mrs Walters was ignored and it has resulted in this terrible, life-altering injury, for which she is owed a big apology ... What makes this case so sad is that this could and should have been avoided.

"It is now imperative that lessons are not only learned but shared with other schools throughout the country to ensure that further suffering is prevented."

Jean Palmer, the council's director of planning, environment and community services, said: "After a period of almost three years, the council felt that it was in the best interests of Mrs Walters, the council and taxpayers to settle the claims.

"Mrs Walters had brought employment claims and separate personal injury claims against the council, and had agreed to settle her employment claims last year without any admission of liability on the part of the council.

"The more recent settlement was made out of court and brings to a close the claims made by Joyce Walters."