

Show me a little warmth

By **Lucy Johnston**

SOCIAL AFFAIRS EDITOR

A CRIPPLED rough sleeper has been denied even basic housing despite pleas from his doctor who believes winter on the streets could kill him.

Steve Gurney, 46, who spends his nights in public lavatories on the sea-front of his home town, suffers from a degenerative spinal condition which makes it difficult for him to walk.

He also has a chronic leg infection after a dog bite which needs regular dressings and which has not healed despite months of antibiotic treatment.

Over the past two years his GP has written to his council's housing department four times urging it to offer Mr Gurney, a former plasterer, accommodation "as a matter of urgency".

One letter sent in May last year described Mr Gurney, of Weymouth, Dorset, as "very vulnerable". Urging Weymouth and Portland Council to house him, it went on: "He suffered severe pneumonia while out on the streets and further suffers from epilepsy and has a leg ulcer which needs regular dressings." The GP's pleas have all been in vain.

Mr Gurney moved from London to Weymouth with his partner 13 years ago. After their child was stillborn, she

Man says he'll die if council doesn't give him a home

moved out and in 2004 he was told he had to leave their home because the tenancy was in her name. He has been on the streets ever since.

Mr Gurney, who survives with the help of food and clothing from the Salvation Army, said: "I am terrified of a winter on the streets. I've been begging the housing department for a place to live for seven years. I would take anything."

His plight highlights Britain's chronic shortage of affordable housing which charities say is growing and will get worse due to the recession and planned cuts to housing benefits next year.

Weymouth, which will host the Olympic sailing events next year, is typical of many towns in the country, according to housing charity Shelter.

Official figures show that last year there were 3,874 people waiting for social housing in the town. Shelter estimates it would take more than 17 years to clear the waiting list there, even if no one else was added to it. The number of

council-run lettings made last year was 220 yet nearly £100million is being spent on road projects around the town for the Games.

Shelter estimates the number of homeless families in Britain has risen by 15 per cent to 11,820 over the past two years. Chief executive Campbell Robb said: "Thousands of families are hanging on to their home by the skin of their teeth. It only takes one small thing to push people into a spiral that ends in homelessness."

Amanda Legg, spokeswoman for Weymouth Council, said: "We have been working very closely with Mr Gurney to help him find a home and will continue to do so."

●Additional reporting: Richard Shrubbs



Picture: PETER WILLOWS/BNS

HARD TIMES: Steve Gurney is terrified of a winter on the streets

