



Just the Tonic



39 **Valentino Vecchietti**
Redesigning the Pride Progress flag to include intersex



40 **Dear Ali**
Ali Hendry has some advice for readers' problems



42 **What's it like to...**
Former Marine iAsia Brown talks switching careers

Tonic Housing is a community-led, not-for-profit organisation with the aim of creating vibrant and inclusive urban LGBTQI affirming retirement communities in the UK where people can share common experiences, find mutual support and enjoy later life. Ahead of the opening of Tonic@Bankhouse, the organisation's first scheme, later this summer, we met CEO Anna Kear to find out more.

Why do you think a scheme like this hasn't existed in the UK previously? There have been plans/dreams to meet the needs of LGBT+ elders, to my knowledge since 1994, but making that a reality has been an almost impossible challenge. Housing is a highly capitalised industry. The requirement to raise capital of circa £50 million, minimum, for a development in London, to create an LGBT+ housing with care project of a scale to cover the running costs

DIVA MEETS ANNA KEAR, CEO OF AN ORGANISATION WORKING TO MAKE LGBTQI+ RETIREMENT HOMES A REALITY
INTERVIEW
CARRIE LYELL

was the main barrier (noting that access to public funding was denied to LGBT+ activities during Section 28 years). Mainstream investors are not interested in niche projects that are considered risky/uncharted territory, and supportive charities cannot access this level of funding, so the options were extremely limited. In the US the tax credit system to developers has unlocked this barrier.

What have been your highs and lows since joining the organisation in 2018?

One of the highs has to be getting the mayoral decision on our funding and the amazing wide-ranging press coverage Tonic achieved to raise the profile of the too often unheard voices of LGBT+ elders. For me, the enduring high is that I've had the honour and pleasure of working with wonderful people, who welcomed an "unknown" queer housing geek into their mists. Tonic now has an amazingly talented team and it has been a delight to see it grow. This is the most personal job



The view from Tonic@Bankhouse. Right: CEO Anna Kear

I've ever done. The lows have been many. This has taken far too long to get to this point, as I was first made aware of the empty apartments at Bankhouse in December 2018. I've been fighting daily to justify why Tonic is needed and jumping hurdles and barriers constantly to outwit those that sought to stand in our way. We would not have achieved this without the strength of our community coming together and supporting Tonic, which fills me with huge pride and keeps me going. I never really understood what resilience meant until I did this job.

What criteria does a person need to meet to be eligible for a Tonic property?

For the Tonic@Bankhouse scheme people need to be 55 or over to be eligible, as this is a planning requirement for the development. Tonic can only provide shared ownership apartments at the moment, so people need to also be able to purchase a minimum 25% share of the property. There

are affordable rented apartments in Bankhouse provided by One Housing. More details on this can be found on our website (tonichousing.org.uk/living-at-tonicbankhouse).

Do you have residents ready to move into Tonic@Bankhouse this summer?

We have a significant number of people interested in purchasing Tonic@Bankhouse apartments and becoming part of our first LGBT+ affirming community. We set up our Register of Interest, and we are in contact directly with many people to discuss what they want and what we can offer at Bankhouse. Community is everything to us – we want to make sure that people are happy if they choose Tonic and that they will be as much a part of it as we are. There are many existing residents at Bankhouse, who rent from One Housing, who will be part of the Tonic's LGBT+ affirming community.

Where are you with plans to launch similar schemes elsewhere in London/the UK?

We are in discussions with a major landowner/developer in London about our next project, though the financing of this is very much dependent upon the success and demand shown for our first scheme. Tonic would love to consider other UK opportunities, and we hope to have the capacity to do this once the first homes are secured.

How do you ensure your schemes remain a safe and affirming space for everyone under the LGBTQI umbrella, when needs can be overlapping and in opposition?

This is what makes Tonic different, as we have sought to make sure we create a community asset in perpetuity (long-term ownership), so that we can ensure our schemes remain a safe and affirming space for everyone under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. Tonic will always own a share of the properties on a 125-year lease and we have a legal agreement with One Housing on our joint commitment to be an LGBT+ affirming community, with a full-time Tonic community manager. Practically, this means working with all residents on issues of inclusivity and respect, through positive affirmation.

Going forward, how will you make sure Tonic represents and responds to the needs of the LGBTQI community as a whole?

Going back to the start, Tonic is community-led, which means that it is run by people with lived experience. Our founders are committed to the need

“I've been fighting daily to justify why Tonic is needed... I never really understood what resilience meant until I did this job”

to have diversity in our governance (including, but not limited to gender, race, disability and socio-economic background). We are currently developing how we make this more >>>



Tonic@Bankhouse outdoor space

THE COMMUNITY VIEW

KIMBERLY GILLINGWATER, TONIC HOUSING
COMMUNITY PANEL MEMBER

"Tonic have been very clear in their need of our voices and experiences in shaping the brand and services, and in turn I have felt our views have helped shape Tonic's journey. From branding ideas through to particular services extended, we have been asked for feedback and input. I feel very privileged to be part of this journey, almost energised, knowing I have assisted in some small way towards building a safe and thriving space for our community. A space that allows myself and others like me to live our lives out - it feels great!

"The Community Panel is extremely respectful and kind; it's a coming together of individuals with their own stories and experiences, but all knowing how needed this service is for our ageing community. My priority at the moment is to ensure I help get the message out to our community, knowing

this really is going to be an inclusive space. Some of our community have had to live double lives in secrecy, so it's a challenge in itself to change old ways of thinking.

"Being seen and acknowledged as an integral part of the LGBTQI+ community is the biggest challenge facing our ageing [members]. Tonic has become a trailblazer in this regard; providing a service that hones in on our needs, while preserving our identity, is so essential.

"In the future, I hope to see lots of Tonic-led community developments throughout the UK. The Tonic team's dedication and commitment towards getting safe and thriving spaces for our ageing LGBTQI+ will see that happen, but as a charity, we need more backing from local councils and the government to ensure more inclusive spaces are built."

>>> inclusive with recruitment, board trainees, resident involvement and our Community Panel of volunteers, whose recommendations go to the board.

What would you say to those who might question why a space like Tonic is necessary?

There are many who do question this and they are usually, but not exclusively, straight and/or younger. Tonic has a strong advocacy role in our work, so we aim to educate people on the issues, but we do ask for kindness in return. Not everyone has the privileges you may have and we should be kind, thankful and generous to those who fought for the privileges that we now have. Getting older happens to us all, our bodies and minds can become frailer, but we are not defined by it. We are the person we have always been and we should respect and treat people as we would like to be treated.

What advice might you have for an older LGBTQI person or relative who might be struggling to advocate for their needs or the needs of a loved one in a retirement or care home setting?

They can contact us at Tonic or our colleagues at Opening Doors, who run the Pride in Care accreditation scheme.

We recognised in our Building Safe Choices report that there is a real lack of funded support available to LGBT+ older people in this situation. Our colleagues at Stonewall Housing have recently been awarded some charitable funding to recruit an older person's adviser post and we have committed to continue to work together to campaign and seek funding for improved advocacy services for our community.

What's the dream for Tonic Housing?

An amazing, vibrant LGBT+ community-led housing organisation that can enable many different local and diverse projects to achieve their vision sooner and with less barriers. We want to show the world what older LGBT+ community living looks like and change perceptions on ageing being a sad and lonely experience. We are currently applying to become a Registered Provider of Social Housing, so that we can provide affordable rented homes in future as well as other tenures. If we are successful, Tonic will become the first LGBT+ Registered Housing Provider. I will be extremely proud when we achieve that. **□**

Find out more about Tonic Housing at tonichousing.org.uk