

Just the tonic

Interview by Cara Cummings



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It's LGBT History Month - and in Vauxhall, history continues to be made with the launch of Tonic@Bankhouse, the UK's first LGBT+ retirement community. Anna Kear, CEO of Tonic Housing Association, shares the inside story.

Tell us about Tonic's mission as an organisation.

Tonic is a community-led not for profit housing association. Tonic is focused on creating vibrant and inclusive urban LGBT+ affirming retirement communities in the UK, where people can share common experiences, find mutual support and enjoy their later life. Tonic@Bankhouse is our very first scheme which officially opened last September in Vauxhall, London.

Congratulations on the Tonic@Bankhouse launch! How does it feel to see your vision come to life?

It's been a long process. Tonic started as an idea in 2014; it's taken a lot of hard work to get to where we are today. It's easy to get caught up in the day to day of it all, whether that's legal papers, administration or sorting out bills, but the moment you speak to someone who knows that Tonic is the place for them - that's just incredible. Each conversation with a new or prospective resident reaffirms exactly why we're doing this.

What makes Tonic@Bankhouse so special?

We're the very first LGBT+ affirming retirement in the UK, which is a really historic moment for both the LGBT+ community and the housing sector. It shows what's possible - we're proof that it can be done with the right support.

We're community led, which means putting our residents at the very centre of everything we do, and making sure they are supported and safe in their homes. Just this week we had an event to unveil new

artworks that residents had voted on to brighten up communal spaces and add that LGBT+ affirming sparkle.

What can people expect from life within a Tonic community?

Community is at the very core of what we do. Older LGBT+ people can be more isolated than their heterosexual peers, sometimes because of lack of family or children, or lack of places to meet, so it's about creating a space for people to come together and exist happily, without fear of judgement or prejudice. We already have proposals from residents about setting up a book club, a gardening club for the roof garden and more, as well as our already established monthly movie club. There's also the security of having a team on-site, should you need it. The whole building is fully wheelchair accessible. Each apartment is equipped for independent living, but should the time come where some extra support is needed, that's right there too.

Tell us about why Tonic Housing is so necessary.

There are many who ask why Tonic is necessary and they are usually, but not exclusively, straight and/or younger. It's about having somewhere to feel safe, supported and at home. Nobody should have to go back into the closet if they need to access care or support, which sadly is a common story. 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



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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 kind of impact can life in a Tonic community have on residents - and indeed the wider community?

We know from speaking to our new and prospective residents just how important having support and a like-minded community around them is. This combination can have a significant impact on a person's wellbeing and mental health, so on an individual basis that's where Tonic can help. In terms of the wider community, I think it gives people hope. Tonic@Bankhouse shows that there is a way to create affordable housing, that looks good and is high quality for our community, and that we should expect this level of product wherever we go. Many people don't think about their later years until much closer to the time, but we've had such a massive response from younger LGBT+ people who are already asking to be added to the waiting list that it shows this is something that needs to - and will - continue to grow.

You've had an impressive career at the forefront of community-led housing. Why is housing so important to you - and what are some of your career highlights?

Housing is so much more than bricks and mortar. We just have to think about what home means to us. We all need a place to call home, to feel safe, to belong. It's the centre of our happiness and wellbeing. I often recall our first Council House when I was a child moving to another side of the country for my dad to find work. We had very little and our new neighbours rallied round to give us what furniture they could. I think that is where I learned to feel what community means.

I'm fortunate to have many proud achievements in my career, meeting and working with so many amazing people. The ones that stand out personally are being able to build a new women's refuge, helping to develop an affordable homes programme delivering 850 new homes a year, creating a community-led/people first approach to estate regeneration, being an ambassador for cohousing and developing a framework for supporting community-led housing groups. The icing on the cake is Tonic, and being part of creating the UK's first LGBT+ retirement community. The best bit is going to Bankhouse regularly now and meeting with residents and seeing it all come to life - it's the people that make it.

What's next for Tonic?

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 in the near future.

The dream is 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.

... and for you?

It's not really about me. I'm just a facilitator using the skills I've learned over many years working in housing to benefit my community. I will be retiring within the next five years to go travelling in my camper van and handing over the operational reins at Tonic to someone else. That's the beauty of community-led housing - it's never just one person, it takes a village!



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