There have been a busy few days at City Hall this week as the summer lull ends. Firstly on Wednesday I acted as guide to the Belfast Jewish Heritage Tour led by Stephen Jaffe when it came to City Hall, to view in particular the portrait of Sir Otto Jaffe, our first Jewish Lord Mayor (1899 and 1904). He was also High Sheriff in 1901. These were two well attended city tours, at lunch time and in the early evening, which I was pleased to host. Steven gave a talk on Otto Jaffe, his rise and 1st World War fall, in the Council Chamber where he once presided (see pix). The Belfast Telegraph article of that week (linked below) obviously boosted enthusiasm while Good Morning Ulster gave the tour a slot next day. More such tours are certainly being sought. Of course City Hall itself is open for free tours every day while I am happy to give groups my own version.

Yesterday, we opened the Shrouds of the Somme exhibit in the Garden of Remembrance at Belfast City Hall. The Lord Mayor spoke, as did the artist, Rob Heard, who has individually fashioned and wrapped every shroud, intoning the name of each dead soldier as he marked their name off a list. Rob created the over 70,000 Somme shrouds which will be laid out in November in London. The 3,775 shrouds of the Irish soldiers will be in place in Belfast from now until 16 September and I would encourage people to come and view this hugely evocative work.

Later I attended the launch of our major document for this council term, the Belfast Local Development Plan or LDP which will set the parameters for the city for twenty or more years to come. (We were re-granted planning powers in 2015). The plan with its vision for Belfast is now open to consultation with a deadline for responses of 15 November 2018. At the meeting, I spoke on the levels of dereliction in South Belfast and the problem of public sector bodies hoarding land, asking if that can be effectively addressed.

The UUP group also had meetings with the newly appointed Resilience Commissioner and later heard plans from officials for the statues in Belfast City Hall grounds. We were not impressed with some of the more radical ideas for their re-arrangement and a fussy thematic rationalising. The few women (Queen Victoria and Hibernia excepted) currently represented in the grounds and the absence of a statue or similar artefact to a Belfast nationalist or a municipal socialist were discussed with candidate suggestions ranging from the early Labour Party councillor William Walker, to Joe Devlin MP and to Grace Bannister, the first female Lord Mayor.

I am hoping that the proposed Blitz Memorial, which will now be sited in Cathedral Gardens, beside St. Anne’s, and not in the City Hall grounds, can be detached from and allowed to proceed outside these City Hall proposals which may take many years to come to fruition. Plans are already being drawn up by our designers for the form of that memorial in the council-owned Cathedral Gardens with the 1,000 names of the 1941 Blitz dead, both civilian and military, to be carved on it and the streets affected, mapped. However movement is needlessly blocked.

Today, with other councillors and the Chief Executive, I toured the new accommodation block run by Student Roost in Queen Street, a £25 million investment by Lacuna Developments, Watkin Jones, and O’Hare & McGovern bringing life back to the Athletic Stores building, once and now again Swanston House. It will cater for over 300 students from September with excellent and spacious facilities. The city centre will soon have four such buildings, including that in the old Tech, now John Bell House, another being built by Queen’s University just opposite, and another Student Roost toward the new Ulster University site. We were very impressed with the commitment and dedication of the developers, builders and new staff.

In the afternoon, Neil Faris (solicitor) and myself for the Malone House Group had talks on Legacy with the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, asking whether the Irish government intends to offer equal commitments to the NIO Bill proposals and if Dublin’s role over the decades can be subject to the same scrutiny. I notice the News Letter’s ‘Stop The Legacy Scandal’ series continues today with Professor Arthur Aughey writing on the very subject of the absence from the proposals of an historical commission.

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/features/home-to-a-future-president-of-israel-the-inventor-of-haagen-dazs-icecream-and-founder-of-beaverbrooks-the-jewellers-belfasts-remarkable-jewish-history-can-now-be-revealed-37233628.html>