

ANIMAL WELFARE REGULATORY PROCEDURES AT HUNGARIAN DISTRICT OFFICES

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Received 14.08.2026; accepted 21.09.2026

First online publication: 22.09.2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55516/ijlso.v6i1.321>

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Abstract

The study examines the regulatory procedures for animal welfare conducted by Hungarian district offices, with a focus on procedural rather than substantive law. Using a dogmatic, norm-centred approach and drawing on the author's experience as a head of a district office, the study reviews the organisational framework of animal welfare authorities and their powers under the Animal Protection Act. The study then analyses the proceedings through the lens of the General Administrative Procedure Act (Ákr.), examining fundamental principles, client status and legal capacity, and enforcement. The study concludes that the effectiveness of animal welfare law is more limited by fragmented procedural and organisational frameworks than by a lack of substantive rules. Overlapping powers and jurisdictions, particularly between district offices and district clerks, undermine legal certainty, and enforcement heavily relies on cooperation with the tax authority. The paper concludes that the system should be simplified and clarified rather than expanded with further sanctions, and proposes clarifying competences, strengthening professional support for case officers and improving enforcement cooperation.

Key words: animal welfare, administrative procedure, district offices, jurisdiction, enforcement.

INTRODUCTION

One's attitude towards animal welfare is never independent of the individual. Personal experiences, social environment, age and many other factors shape individual preferences in this area. It could also be said that everyone has an inner, subjective attitude towards animal welfare, which acts as a moral compass. However, this compass does not always point towards the forms of behaviour

accepted or expected by the wider sections of society; rather, it often deviates in the opposite direction, thereby disrupting the rules of social coexistence.

One of the state's most important tasks is to ensure the smooth coexistence of society, as this leads to lasting prosperity. Within this system, any activity that has the opposite effect must be brought under state scrutiny. It must be acknowledged that, on the path towards this goal, many steps must be taken that precede animal welfare measures; however, history shows that, once societies have reached a certain level of organisation, they arrive at a point where there is a social demand for the institutionalisation of animal protection, since 'The greatness and moral progress of a nation are faithfully reflected in the way it treats animals.'¹

A society always has rules of conduct governing its relationship with animals, but the purpose, depth and complexity of these rules depend largely on the community in question. These rules are essentially derivatives of the mutual or one-sided interdependence between humans and animals, which must have existed from the very beginning of human existence.

Even our hunter-gatherer ancestors could not have survived without a system of rules—as yet unwritten at the time—governing their harmonious and, above all, sustainable relationship with nature (e.g. the prohibition on overhunting), as this would have led to the rapid collapse of wildlife populations and, consequently, of the human population itself. These rules began to expand significantly with the settlement of human communities and the transition to agriculture. Agriculture encompassed not only crop cultivation but also animal husbandry, through which our ancestors ensured the survival of their communities for thousands of years.²

Our social relationship with animals could never be interpreted simply in the context of a food source. Attempts have been made to interpret this obvious fact in many ways, of which perhaps the best known is the theory of biophilia, which, according to the classic definition, is 'an innate orientation towards life and life-like processes'.³ In short, this could be explained as humanity's innate attraction to living beings and nature. A connection with nature is a fundamental need that enhances well-being and mental wellbeing. This theory also highlights that human nature has always had a special relationship with animals, the most striking manifestation of which is keeping companion animals, an activity which, to an outside observer, has no clearly identifiable positive effect. From the pet owner's perspective, however, this represents the formation of an irreplaceable

¹ "The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated." A saying attributed to Mahatma Gandhi <https://www.citatum.hu/idezet/24339> (downloaded on 23 February 2026)

² Vigne, Jean-Denis (2011) The origins of animal domestication and husbandry: A major change in the history of humanity and the biosphere. *Comptes Rendus Biologies*, 334(3), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crv.2010.12.009>, 171–181.

³ Wilson, Edward O. (1984) *Biophilia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1.

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social bond, the effects of which are most often not to be found in the physical realm.

Socially speaking, the issue of animal husbandry has become a sensitive area in our times, one that is often fraught with irreconcilable contradictions. The disappearance of small-scale farming and increasing alienation from nature are characteristics of every modern society, accompanied by the emergence of opposition to large-scale livestock farming and the growing role of companion animals. It falls to the state to resolve these conflicts, and it most often responds using traditional means drawn from the fields of legislation and law enforcement. There are also positive examples of solutions that differ from the aforementioned, primarily in the form of educational initiatives; however, the primacy of traditional instruments remains unquestionable.

Within the state's system of instruments, this study aims to focus on the area of law enforcement, which is in itself an impressively diverse field, encompassing numerous legal institutions under civil and public law, including those of criminal and administrative law. Narrowing the focus, the study attempts to examine a clearly definable area of public administration within the very extensive and constantly expanding legal framework of animal welfare. This area encompasses the animal welfare administrative proceedings conducted by district offices; however, the topic is approached not from the perspective of substantive law, but with a focus on procedural law. Rather than differences in substantive law, the present study centres on identifying commonalities in procedural law, analysing problems in the application of the law, and identifying possible solutions.

I. METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the aim of this study, I considered it appropriate to apply primarily dogmatic methods, in the course of which I endeavoured to review the relevant parts of the legislation and public-law regulatory instruments dealing with the subject.

Within the framework of administrative law, this topic covers the enforcement of substantive provisions; consequently, the focus is primarily on procedural provisions, as these 'determine the order of the functioning and actions of administrative bodies'.⁴ In addition, it is necessary to address certain organisational norms, as, in my view, knowledge of the law-enforcing body is essential for placing the proceedings conducted in their proper context, given that organisational norms 'define the internal structure and management of individual administrative bodies, as well as the relationships between organisational units.'⁵

⁴ Nagy, Marianna (2019) Közigazgatási jogi norma. [Administrative law norm]. In: Jakab et al. (eds.): Online Encyclopaedia of Legal Science [38] <http://ijoten.hu/szocikk/kozigazgatasi-jogi-norma> (downloaded on 28 February 2026)

⁵ Nagy, Marianna (2019). [37]

An understanding of the aforementioned norms is gained by following the regulatory structure of the General Public Administration Act⁶, which I have supplemented at the organisational level with a substantive analysis of the external legal sources⁷ that define the organisation of government offices and district offices. Given the space constraints of a study of this nature, such an examination of the Ákr. cannot be exhaustive; I have therefore set out to identify the issues I consider most significant, based on my own practical experience.

The Act on Government Offices serves as the legal basis for the organisation and management of government offices and district offices, as well as for the administration of government offices and – amongst other things – their tasks and powers, whilst government offices are the Government’s territorial public administration bodies with general powers.”⁸ Act XXVIII of 1998 on the protection and welfare of animals is aligned with this defined organisational structure. It is worth highlighting, at the level of government decrees, Government Decree No. 568/2022 (23 December) on the government offices of the capital and the counties, as well as the district (capital district) offices, which lays down the rules governing the jurisdiction, the exercise of employer’s rights and further training within the government office system⁹, and further defines the duties of the government offices and district offices, as well as those of their heads. These detailed rules are supplemented with sector-specific provisions by Government Decree No. 383/2016 (XII. 2.) on the designation of bodies performing official and administrative tasks in the field of agriculture, which – amongst other things – also provides for the designation of animal welfare authorities. Among the public law instruments regulating organisation, KTM Instruction No. 15/2024 (28 June) sets out the rules of organisation and operation for the government offices in the capital and the counties, which are further refined by the rules of procedure of the individual organisational units of these government offices.

The study essentially adopts a norm-centred approach, as it primarily examines the texts of the legislation, whilst interpreting the administrative procedures referred to in the title in accordance with the following definition: ‘by administrative procedure, we mean the totality of general and specific procedural legislation relating to the administrative procedures of public authorities.’¹⁰ In analysing the various legal institutions, I have taken into account the legal

⁶ Act CL of 2016 on General Administrative Procedure (Ákr.)

⁷ Act CXXV of 2018 on Government Administration (Kit.) and Government Decree No. 568/2022 (23 December) on the Capital City and County Government Offices and the District (Capital City District) Offices

⁸ Article 17(3) of the Fundamental Law of Hungary

⁹ Árvai, Zsuzsanna (2020): Experience with the Legal Supervision of Hungarian Local Governments. *Curentul Juridic.* Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 34–40.

¹⁰ Balázs, István (2023): A közigazgatási eljárás fogalma és szabályozási rendszerei [The Concept and Regulatory Frameworks of Administrative Procedure], In: *Közigazgatási eljárások* [Administrative Procedures], University of Debrecen, Debrecen, p. 42.

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situation in force on 1 January 2026. In preparing this study—and, in particular, in identifying problems and formulating proposed solutions—the practical experience I have gained over several years as the head of a district office in the field of animal welfare administrative procedures has proved to be of considerable assistance. As the head of an animal welfare authority, I regularly encounter anomalies arising in the day-to-day application of the law, and I am in direct contact with those involved in animal welfare proceedings, such as official veterinary officers, animal keepers and civil society organisations.

II. ANIMAL WELFARE AUTHORITIES

The organisational structure of animal welfare authorities effectively covers all territorial levels of public administration, from the national to the local level. Whilst this is welcome from an organisational and animal welfare perspective, uncertainties regarding jurisdiction are common in day-to-day practice. The scope of the authorities' responsibilities is difficult to ascertain, which leads to problems in the application of the law.¹¹

The animal welfare authorities are designated by Government Decree No. 383/2016 (XII.2.) on the designation of bodies performing agricultural regulatory and administrative tasks.¹² The Minister, who in this case is the Minister for Agriculture, has been designated as the animal welfare authority; however, it can be stated that, in practice, the Minister plays no role in official proceedings. Regardless of this, pursuant to Government Decree No. on the Statute of the Government¹³, the Minister has significant responsibilities and powers in this area.

The National Food Chain Safety Office (hereinafter: NÉBIH) has also been designated; as a budgetary body operating as a central authority, it consequently exercises its powers in regulatory matters with nationwide jurisdiction. Within the organisation, there is a Directorate for Animal Health, Animal Welfare and Veterinary Products, which includes a separate Animal Welfare Department. In addition to these, the county government offices – and, in particular, the Pest County Government Office – exercise nationwide jurisdiction in certain cases. Below this level, authority is exercised by the district offices and the district clerks, who, as the lowest-level actors in the territorial public

¹¹ Bándli, Bence (2024) Az elsőfokú állatvédelmi hatóságok közötti hatáskör- és feladatmegosztás kihívásai a gyakorlatban [The challenges of the division of powers and responsibilities between first-instance animal welfare authorities in practice], 26.
https://kozugsugyunkazallatvedelem.hu/data/file/2024/09/09/10_az_elfofoku_allatvedelmi_hatosagok_kozotti_hataskor.pdf (downloaded on 5 March 2026)

¹² Government Decree No. 383/2016, Section 5(1)

¹³ GOVERNMENT DECREE NO. 182/2022 (24 MAY) ON THE DUTIES AND POWERS OF MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT

administration, are best placed to take the necessary measures directly.¹⁴ The district offices comprise departments, a detailed list of which is set out in KTM Instruction No. 15/2024 (28 June) on the organisational and operational regulations of the capital city and county government offices. The names of the departments are standardised nationwide; animal welfare tasks are carried out by the Food Chain Safety and Animal Health Departments. Not all district offices operating in the country have the aforementioned department; I shall explain the reason for this when discussing the rules on jurisdiction.

III. OFFICIAL DUTIES RELATING TO ANIMAL WELFARE

Act XXVIII of 1998 on the Protection and Welfare of Animals (hereinafter: Ávtv.) sets out numerous powers for animal welfare authorities, to which the specific authorities are assigned by Government Decree No. 383/2016 (XII.2.). One distinctive feature of the legislation is the designation of multiple authorities for specific powers, meaning that more than one authority may have the power to act in a given matter.

Within the animal welfare regulatory system, the fact that more than one body may be authorised to take action is not in itself considered a problem, as this can facilitate a sensible division of tasks. In practice, however, it can cause problems if it is unclear in a given case exactly which authority has jurisdiction. In such cases, there is a risk that several bodies may take action on the same matter, or that none of them will take action in good time. This can lead to overlapping jurisdictions, parallel proceedings and the incorrect application of legislation, which may ultimately undermine legal certainty.

Generally speaking, and not specifically in relation to animal welfare proceedings, uncertainty may also arise from the fact that, whilst district offices operate as organisational units of the county government office – a budgetary body and legal entity – they nevertheless possess independent powers and cannot be instructed in individual cases. From the outside – from the client’s perspective, so to speak – it appears that the matter is being handled by a single organisation, whilst in reality organisational units with differing powers and jurisdictions are involved.

A common feature of all the authorities mentioned in the previous chapters is that the Animal Protection Act (Ávtv.) enables them to monitor compliance with the provisions of the Act and to impose sanctions in the event of a breach of the law, which may take the form of an animal welfare fine, an on-the-spot fine, or even a ban on keeping animals.¹⁵ It should be noted that the sanctions

¹⁴ Hoffman, István (2012) A járás helye a magyar közigazgatás rendszerében [The Place of the District in the Hungarian Public Administration System], Magyar Közigazgatás, 2/1, 19–32.

¹⁵ Sections 45/A and 43 of the Ávtv. See also Árva, Zsuzsanna (2012) Merre tovább, szabálysértési jog? [Where next for the law on administrative offences], Új Magyar Közigazgatás, Vol. 5, No. 9, pp. 46–53.

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applicable in addition to animal welfare fines apply to both pets and non-pet animals if the animal keeper breaches the provisions set out in legislation or an official decision.¹⁶

In addition to imposing a fine, any authority may also issue a specific order, which may require the animal keeper to carry out specific construction work to ensure the animal is housed appropriately and safely and to prevent it from escaping, or, in the event of a breach of animal welfare or animal husbandry rules, to require the animal keeper to perform a specific act, or to tolerate or cease such actions in the interests of animal welfare.¹⁷

In addition to the above, district offices have broad regulatory powers in relation to dogs, which fall exclusively within the remit of the district authorities. These include, amongst other things, requiring the dog owner to comply with stricter rules when walking the dog in public spaces; requiring the dog owner to alter the dog's living conditions and establish stricter conditions of care; requiring the dog owner to undertake training in consultation with an expert qualified to assess the dog's behaviour; ordering the dog to be neutered; classifying the dog as dangerous; or even ordering the dog to be put down.¹⁸ Furthermore, the district authority has exclusive jurisdiction to confiscate animals bred or kept for their fur in the event of a legal infringement, and to arrange for the animal to be put down if no suitable rehoming can be found; it is also responsible for receiving notifications regarding the establishment of animal boarding facilities and animal shelters.¹⁹

In the area under review, the most common issues regarding the demarcation of powers arise among clients, particularly in relation to the district office and the district clerk, which stem from their partly overlapping and partly distinct powers in the field of animal welfare and their overlapping jurisdictions. As a general rule, both authorities may take action in the event of breaches of animal welfare and animal husbandry regulations; however, in the case of dogs, for example, the district office has a significantly broader range of measures at its disposal. This problem was inherited by the district offices, as it existed even before their establishment, albeit at that time between the local registrar and the government office. With the restructuring of the government office's powers, the

¹⁶ Aranyosi, Gergő (2024) Járási hivatalok és kormányhivatalok feladatai az állatvédelemben [The Roles of District Offices and Government Offices in Animal Welfare], 15. https://kozugsugyunkazallatvedelem.hu/data/file/2024/09/09/09_jarasihivatalok_kormanyhivatalok.pdf (downloaded on 5 March 2026) .

¹⁷ Section 42/E of the Ávtv.

¹⁸ Section 42/D of the Ávtv.

¹⁹ Ávtv. Section 19/A and Section 41

responsibility was transferred to the district offices, whilst the district clerk also remained an official authority.²⁰

IV. ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEEDINGS

IV.1. General Administrative Procedure

The procedural framework for animal welfare administrative proceedings is provided by the Administrative Procedure Act (Ákr.), as the authority must apply the provisions of the Ákr. when conducting proceedings in administrative matters. In order to interpret the aforementioned provision, the concepts of ‘administrative matter’ and ‘authority’ must be clarified from an animal welfare perspective.

Based on the discussion in Chapter IV, it can be clearly stated that animal welfare matters correspond to the concept of an ‘administrative matter’ in terms of both the imposition of obligations and the imposition of sanctions, whilst Chapter III defines the scope of the authorities²¹.

In the following, I shall examine those provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act where, in my view, the procedures relevant to this topic exhibit specific features or significant procedural differences compared to other procedures; exploring and understanding these may assist in the development of sound legal practice.

IV.2. Procedural principles

In the case of administrative proceedings, procedural principles are very rarely the focus of attention, and direct reference is not usually made to them, whilst their role is indisputable, since ‘the function of the fundamental principles of administrative procedure is to facilitate the correct interpretation and application of legislation.’²² In addition to the principles of legality, ex officio action, efficiency, good faith and trust, the Administrative Procedure Act sets out the principles relating to the client; of these, I wish to highlight the following in line with the subject of this study.

The rules of procedure regard proceedings initiated upon application as the standard case and set out the rules for ex officio proceedings as special provisions, whilst the principle of officiality is also enshrined at a fundamental level. In animal welfare cases, the role of proceedings initiated upon application is indisputable, even though in recent years activities that may be carried out on the basis of a notification – such as the provision of dog control services – have come

²⁰ Farkas, Edit (2012) *Hatáskörváltások a járási hivatalok megalakulásával* [Changes in Jurisdiction Following the Establishment of District Offices], *Jegyző és Közigazgatás* 2012/6, pp. 12–13.

²¹ Section 9 of the Ákr.

²² LANG, ZOLTÁN (2017) *AZ ÚJ, ÁLTALÁNOS KÖZIGAZGATÁSI RENDTARTÁSRÓL SZÓLÓ TÖRVÉNY AZ ALAPELVEK SZEMSZÖGÉBŐL*, [THE NEW ACT ON GENERAL ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES], *JEGYZŐ ÉS KÖZIGAZGATÁS*, 2017/6, p. 9

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to the fore under the provisions of Act LXXVI of 2009 on the general rules for the commencement and continuation of service activities.

By their very nature, animal welfare proceedings inherently involve elements of *ex officio* action, since official intervention in the interests of the protected legal subjects – that is, animals – can only take place in this form. However, it must not be forgotten that, apart from the form in which the proceedings are initiated, ‘regardless of how the proceedings were initiated, the principle of officiality also extends to the clarification of the facts and the determination of the scope of the evidence.’²³ Thus, the significance of this fundamental principle also applies to proceedings initiated upon application, in light of which the authority is not bound by any deficiencies in the evidence submitted by the applicant.

Certain aspects of the principle of legality warrant special mention. The authority must act on the basis of statutory authorisation, exercising its powers within the framework of the law and in accordance with their intended purpose; despite the apparent simplicity of this general requirement, it often poses a challenge to those applying the law in practice. Certain cases involving animal welfare – such as proceedings requiring immediate action due to animal cruelty – impose an obligation on the authority whereby adhering to the legal framework often places a significant burden on it, particularly if the animal keeper refuses to cooperate actively during the authority’s intervention. The pressure of having to take immediate action, working under time constraints, and the presence of civil society organisations or even the police are all factors that may lead the official conducting the proceedings to make errors, which – even if only due to an error in the report – may result in the proceedings being in breach of the law. If we add to this the fact that it is extremely rare for a case officer with a law degree to handle such matters, it becomes clear how quickly even the fundamental requirement of the principle of legality can be compromised.

The principle of legality also stipulates that, when exercising its powers, the authority must act within the time limits specified by law and within a reasonable timeframe. The question arises as to what constitutes a reasonable timeframe in proceedings concerning animals, which, depending on the procedure, may be as short as eight days or as long as sixty days under the law. But can we really speak of such timeframes as ‘reasonable’ when a case of animal cruelty arises? The margin for manoeuvre is very narrow, as the case officer must translate a personal, internal decision – taken almost immediately on the basis of fundamental moral judgement – into the legal framework. This framework, in turn, requires that those involved in the proceedings – who may even include the

²³ NAGY, MARIANNA (2017) AZ OFFICIALITÁS AZ ÁLTALÁNOS KÖZIGAZGATÁSI RENDTARTÁSBAN [OFFICIALITY IN THE GENERAL ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE ACT], JEGYZŐ ÉS KÖZIGAZGATÁS, 2017/11, p. 510.

animal keepers who committed the animal cruelty, as clients – be afforded a reasonable period of time to make their statements or examine the evidence, as failure to do so would render the proceedings open to challenge.

In accordance with the principle of efficiency, ‘the authority shall organise its activities in such a way as to ensure that the procedure incurs the lowest possible costs for all parties involved.’²⁴ In terms of costs, the most significant items may relate to the potential care of animals, as in certain cases the authority has the option – indeed, the obligation – to remove the animals and arrange for their care at the owner’s expense.

To an outside observer, this requirement does not pose a problem, as at first glance everyone envisages an ideal scenario in which the authorities have to rehome a Labrador in distress – a situation that would, in practice, be manageable for almost anyone, given that who wouldn’t want to temporarily take in a suffering pet? Unfortunately, the reality is very different. Animals collected by hoarders due to their mental health issues, or those kept by breeders for profit, cannot be treated as simply ‘easy to rehome’ simply because of their sheer numbers, as the number of animals can range from just a few to as many as a hundred. If we add to this the varying care and rehoming requirements depending on breed, sex and age, it is immediately apparent that finding a suitable solution is by no means a simple task. Even if a suitable rehoming facility is found, the costs can rise to such a level that recouping them becomes highly questionable. Furthermore, the decision to impose these costs on the owner must be made in a decision that is open to independent legal challenge, in which the authority must set out its arguments in detail, taking into account, amongst other things, the principle of efficiency.

Civil society organisations and even the media often express bewilderment at what they perceive as the authority’s slowness and its perceived failure to take immediate action.²⁵ Behind this, however, lies the practical application of another fundamental principle, which may appear to slow down the proceedings. This fundamental principle is the principle of good faith, which states that ‘All participants in the proceedings are obliged to act in good faith and to cooperate with the other participants’, and further that ‘The good faith of the client and other participants in the proceedings must be presumed.’²⁶ The concept of good faith is not defined in administrative law, but generally speaking, in legal terms, it is understood to refer to ‘a person who, even whilst exercising due care, does not, or ought not to, be aware of facts contrary to appearances’.²⁷

²⁴ Section 4 of the Act

²⁵ Carmen Ungur-Brehoi, “Like, Share, (In) Security In The Age Of Influencers”, in *International Journal of Legal and Social Order*, vol.5, nr.1/2025, p. 455-468, DOI: 10.55516/IJLSO.V5I1.282

²⁶ Section 6 of the Act

²⁷ <https://lexikon.uni-nke.hu/szocikk/johiszemu-eljaras-elve/> (downloaded on 12 March 2026)

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From a procedural perspective, this means that at the initial stage of the proceedings, when evidence is not yet fully available and the clarification of the facts is limited due to time constraints, the authority often has to rely on the statements of the client and/or witnesses. This stage of the proceedings is considered the most critical from a procedural point of view, as it is at this point that the infringement of the law is documented, and it is at this stage that the necessary immediate measures should be taken. In accordance with the fundamental principle, everyone – including the authority – must presume the good faith of the parties involved, which in this context includes even the person accused of animal cruelty.

“The burden of rebutting this presumption lies with the authority; that is to say, it is for the authority to prove that the client acted in bad faith.”²⁸ All this means that evidence must be available for the authority to be able to take substantive action against clients acting in bad faith. However, such evidence is not always immediately available; it can only be obtained at a later stage of the proceedings. Claims made by the animal abuser – such as that the animal’s injuries resulted from an accident, an attack by another animal, etc., and not from the abuser’s own abusive behaviour – can only be refuted during the clarification of the facts, which may involve locating witnesses or consulting experts.

IV.3. Client status

Defining the scope of clients is significant for several reasons. On the one hand, because an inadequate definition of the scope of clients constitutes grounds for nullity, and, on the other hand, because the Administrative Procedure Act (Ákr.) is authority-centred legislation designed primarily to simplify and expedite administrative work, which often hinders or even completely eliminates the exercise of clients’ rights; one example of this is the authority’s acknowledgement of notifications²⁹, where client participation in the proceedings is practically impossible.

The definition of a ‘party’ is, of course, set out in the Administrative Procedure Act, which states that ‘A party is a natural or legal person, or other organisation, whose rights or legitimate interests are directly affected by the matter, in respect of whom the official register contains data, or who has been subject to an official inspection.’³⁰ In animal welfare proceedings, the most

²⁸ Hajas, Barnabás (2017) *Alapelvek és a törvény hatálya* [Principles and the scope of the Act], In: Petrik, Ferenc (ed.) *Commentary on the General Public Administration Act, HVG-ORAC*, Budapest, p. 36.

²⁹ F. Rozsnyai, Krisztina (2020) *Ügyféli jogosultságok a hatósági eljárásban – több vagy kevesebb?* [Clients’ Rights in Administrative Proceedings – More or Less], *Közjogi Szemle*, 2020/2, p. 11.

³⁰ Section 10(1) of the Act

typical client is the animal keeper, who is none other than “the owner of the animal, or the person who cares for and supervises the animal or herd”.³¹

In most cases, identifying the client as the animal keeper poses no problem, as the animal keeper is often also the owner of the animal; thus, it is established under civil law that their rights or legitimate interests are directly affected by the case in question. However, the animal keeper need not necessarily be the owner; this does not affect their status as a client, given the civil law relationship mentioned earlier. A prerequisite for legal capacity is legal personality³², a condition which is always met in the case of the owner.

If the animal keeper is not the owner but the animal’s carer or supervisor, the status of a party to the proceedings does not automatically follow from the general rules. However, the Animal Protection Act imposes the obligations not on the owner but on the animal keeper; thus, in the event of an official inspection, the animal keeper is automatically subject to such an inspection and is entitled to the legal status of a party to the proceedings. It should be noted here that, in the event of a failure to fulfil these obligations, the animal keeper also bears strict liability and thus becomes the addressee of any sanctions; consequently, they are also a party to the proceedings even without the legal status of an owner.

Both legal and natural persons may have the status of a party to the proceedings, as, under civil law, there is generally no restriction on who may be the owner of an animal. The situation is not so clear-cut in the case of the animal’s carer or supervisor. This raises the question of whether, where the owner and the carer or supervisor are different persons, a legal person can be regarded as a carer or supervisor, or whether this status can only be based on direct activities carried out with the animals by natural persons. We could also approach the matter by considering whether a legal entity may also provide care and supervision on a contractual basis, thereby qualifying as an animal keeper, or whether only a private individual employed by the legal entity may hold such status.

In fact, from a legal perspective, there is no argument against a legal person acting as a carer or supervisor; nevertheless, the uncertainty inherent in this stems from the fact that, under criminal law, animal cruelty can only be committed by a natural person; and since it is common for the animal keeper to be the perpetrator of the cruelty, this tendency to prioritise natural persons in this regard has also seeped into administrative practice.

The provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act (Ákr.) relating to parties to proceedings allow for the fact that ‘a law or government decree may, in respect of a specific type of case, define the circle of persons and organisations who (which) are deemed to be parties to proceedings by virtue of the law’³³ The

³¹ Section 3(1) of the Act on Administrative Proceedings

³² Hajas (2017), p. 47.

³³ Section 10(2) of the Act

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Animal Protection Act (Ávtv.) makes use of this option and confers client status ex lege upon “those civil organisations, as defined in the Act on the Right of Association, Public Benefit Status and the Operation and Support of Civil Organisations, whose activities are directed towards the protection of animals”³⁴, but this does not apply generally to all animal welfare proceedings; rather, it applies only where they have initiated administrative proceedings on the grounds of a breach of animal welfare legislation.

In the case of civil society organisations, their status as parties to the proceedings arises by operation of law; thus, provided the statutory conditions are met, there is no need to confirm this status by a separate decision, as they automatically become parties to the proceedings by virtue of having initiated them. However, this does not mean that the existence of the statutory conditions need not be examined, i.e. whether the initiator actually qualifies as a civil society organisation. Civil society organisations are registered by the court, so the organisation can be clearly identified on this basis, particularly given that the register of civil society organisations is an official and public record.³⁵ For this reason, if the organisation fails to prove its civil society status when initiating the proceedings, the authority can simply establish whether or not it possesses such status.

If, on the basis of the investigation, the initiator is not classified as a civil society organisation, then it is not entitled to client status ex lege. At this point, it is important to emphasise that we are referring to the initiator of the proceedings and not the applicant, and furthermore that the initiative may be taken in the event of a breach of animal welfare legislation. These two points are significant because the authority may mistakenly treat the submission as an application and identify the civil society organisation as the applicant. If the civil society organisation’s legal status is not recognised, this misinterpretation of the law may lead to the ‘application’ being rejected; in the best-case scenario, this is followed by the initiation of an ex officio procedure, whilst in the worst-case scenario, the case is closed without further action.

Since the legislator ensures the possibility of initiating proceedings and the legal standing of the client in the event of a breach of the law, it can be clearly stated that civil society organisations are intended to assist the authorities in detecting breaches of the law, which helps to uncover latent cases. In such cases, the rules governing official inspections and ex officio proceedings must be applied, as the purpose of an official inspection is specifically to verify compliance with the provisions laid down in the legislation, and ex officio proceedings are initiated when the circumstances giving rise to the proceedings

³⁴ Section 48(1) of the Administrative Procedure Act

³⁵ <https://birosag.hu/ugyfeleknek/civil-szervezetek/civil-szervezetek-nevjegyzeke> (downloaded on 13 March 2026)

come to the attention of the authority.³⁶ Consequently, the possibility of proceedings being initiated upon request is ruled out.

Notwithstanding the above, under the general rules, an applicant not identified as a civil society organisation may submit a separate application for the determination of client status, which the authority must assess and on which it must issue a decision that is subject to a separate legal remedy. However, if, on this basis, the initiator is not recognised as a client, or if no application for client status is even submitted, the content of the initiator's submission may be classified as a complaint or a report in the public interest, which is governed by Act XXV of 2023 on complaints, Public Interest Reports and the Rules Governing the Reporting of Misconduct (Act XXV of 2023 on Complaints, hereinafter 'the Complaints Act'). However, this procedure no longer falls within the scope of the Ákr.; it must be conducted in accordance with separate procedural rules.

Ensuring the legal status of civil society organisations as parties to proceedings also helps to establish civil oversight of animal welfare proceedings, which in most cases is more supportive than strictly supervisory in nature. However, what happens if this oversight identifies a problem in the proceedings? The rights of parties under the Ákr. are very broad, ranging, amongst other things, from access to documents, through examination of the evidence, to being notified of the decision. However, this prominent role is usually limited exclusively to the administrative procedure itself, and does not extend to any subsequent administrative litigation; thus, if a client fails to have their interests upheld during the administrative procedure, it becomes considerably more difficult to do so afterwards.

This distinction between administrative and litigation proceedings stems from the fact that client status does not in all cases confer the right to bring an action. "Client status does not automatically imply the possibility of a claim being considered on its merits; an application to initiate court proceedings may only be submitted by a party with an interest in the dispute."³⁷ A stake in the matter and direct legal interest are required to hold the position of claimant, and the burden of proving this lies with the claimant.³⁸ This requirement significantly curtails the activities of civil society organisations in this area; however, from a practical perspective, it can also be stated that organisations operating in this sphere are in any case ill-equipped for potential litigation, lacking both the legal expertise and the financial resources to do so. However, we cannot claim that this situation has arisen contrary to the legislator's clear intention, since in specific cases the legislator itself allows for legal action to be taken: where there has been a breach

³⁶ Agricultural Act, Sections 99 and 104(1)(a).

³⁷ GYURÁN, ILDIKÓ ET AL. (2022) A KERESHETŐSÉGI JOG A KÖZIGAZGATÁSI PEREKBE AZ EURÓPAI ÉS NEMZETI NORMÁK ALAPJÁN [THE RIGHT OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN ADMINISTRATIVE LITIGATION UNDER EUROPEAN AND NATIONAL STANDARDS], EURÓPAI JOG, 2022/6, p. 23.

³⁸ Kfv.37168/2018/6. <https://jogkodox.hu/doc/5324939> (DOWNLOADED ON 13 MARCH 2026).

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of animal welfare legislation, civil society organisations may even bring proceedings directly before the court to seek an injunction against such conduct.³⁹

IV.4. Jurisdiction

In accordance with the general procedural obligation, the animal welfare authority is required to act within its area of jurisdiction in matters falling within its remit. When the district offices were established, the aim was to create a unified, sub-county, lower-middle-level system of public administration with transparent responsibilities and powers, which would take over tasks from both the specialist administrative bodies of the county government offices and the mayor's offices. As a result, the district animal health and food control offices were established in 2013, amongst other measures.⁴⁰ These organisational units became the predecessors of the district food chain safety and animal health departments currently in operation.

The locations and areas of jurisdiction of the district offices, together with a detailed list of the municipalities falling within their remit, are set out in Government Decree No. 568/2022 (23 December), on the basis of which 174 district and 23 municipal offices operate in Hungary.⁴¹

The concept behind the establishment of a uniform district level assumed that all district offices would have a uniform portfolio of tasks and powers, which has been partially realised, for if we review the organisational and operational regulations of the government offices in the capital and the counties, it is immediately apparent that the organisational structures of the districts show significant similarities.⁴² Almost every office has departments dealing with government services, guardianship, regulatory matters or employment; however, the food chain safety and animal health departments, to which animal welfare tasks have been assigned, are only present in certain offices.

The actual delimitation of jurisdiction is set out in Government Decree No. 383/2016 (XII. 2.) on the designation of bodies performing agricultural regulatory and administrative tasks.⁴³ The decree defines atypical district jurisdictions in that not every district is designated; instead, it follows the practice of assigning the jurisdictions of several districts to individual district offices. For example, the Debrecen District Office is assigned not only the Debrecen district but also the Nyíradony district.

This arrangement undermines the requirement for a uniform district office structure, a problem which has not been rectified even in the thirteen years since

³⁹ Section 48(2) of the Ávtv.

⁴⁰ Zöld-Nagy, Viktória (2012) A járások és a járási hivatalok kialakítása [The establishment of districts and district offices], *Jegyző és Közigazgatás*, 2012/3, pp. 4–5.

⁴¹ Government Decree No. 568/2022 (23 December) Annex 1.

⁴² KTM Instruction No. 15/2024 (28 June), Appendices 2–21.

⁴³ Annex 3 to Government Decree No. 383/2016 (2 December).

the districts were re-established. I would note that this is not a problem unique to this area; district public health services also face similar difficulties.

A solution that deviates from general district jurisdiction has a negative impact on the handling of animal welfare cases, as a member of the public cannot be expected to know where to initiate such proceedings, particularly as they would often have to go to the administrative centre of another district located several tens of kilometres away. Based on practical experience, the legislator has come to terms with the situation; in other words, there are currently no signs that general district jurisdiction will be established.

This situation has arisen as a result of several factors, the most important of which is an understanding of the historical background. Long before the establishment of district or even government office structures, a nationwide system of District Animal Health and Food Control Offices was set up, comprising organisational units operating at a level below the county. These were subordinate to the county office, and their head was the district chief veterinary officer. This arrangement was not unusual in the organisation of local government at the time; one might think, for example, of the district land registries or the micro-regional public health institutes.

The district system naturally entailed the centralisation of tasks and their concentration in specific locations. This can be regarded as a natural process, as this type of activity required a relatively small staff with specialised expertise, which was thus easier to manage in terms of work organisation. Furthermore, the task is not fundamentally based on receiving clients in an office environment, but requires work to be carried out on site. The smaller number of civil servants, combined with the limited number of client contacts at the office, has led to the continued existence of the centralised system; the only change over the past decade has been the alignment of the former district boundaries with the county boundaries.

Government Decree No. 383/2016 (XII. 2.), as mentioned earlier, defines the areas of jurisdiction of the district offices acting within the remit of animal welfare. However, this statement is only indirectly true, as the relevant annex to the decree does not designate the areas of jurisdiction of district offices acting within the remit of animal welfare, but rather those acting as food chain supervisory bodies within the remit of food chain safety and animal health – which are, however, areas of authority distinct from animal welfare. This is a point that may present difficulties for clients or officials familiarising themselves with the subject, as even if they search directly for the applicable rules on jurisdiction – including in legislation – they will only be able to find them indirectly.

The solution is provided by the provision in the legislation which designates as the animal welfare authority not simply the district office, but the district office acting within the remit of food chain safety and animal health,

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hereinafter referred to simply as the district office⁴⁴. This legislative solution, adopted for the sake of simplification, will link animal welfare to food chain safety in terms of jurisdiction.

IV.5. Sanctions and enforcement

Whatever decision the authority may have taken in the interests of animal welfare – however sound the legal and professional arguments put forward, and however well-founded the procedural steps taken – the whole thing can come crashing down like a house of cards if the party subject to the decision fails to comply voluntarily with its terms. This is when enforcement comes into play, which is no longer primarily the responsibility of the animal welfare authority; however, its effectiveness fundamentally determines how the authority is perceived.

The authority has a wide range of measures at its disposal against those who breach the law, including the imposition of animal welfare fines, the level of which is already significantly deterrent; for instance, in the case of a dog that has escaped onto the street, the fine starts at 450,000 forints, even without considering any other circumstances.⁴⁵ This is the level at which the administrative officer is often daunted by the prospect of establishing strict liability, as their scope for discretion is very limited. At this level, voluntary compliance is by no means a given, primarily due to financial constraints.

A fine is, of course, not the only tool available; indeed, we can even state that it is not the most appropriate means of improving the animals' situation as quickly as possible.

When considering the proportionality of sanctions and penalties, we can identify the concurrent social factors that drive an individual to commit a crime, a misdemeanor, or another illicit act. We can also observe how the family, social, cultural, educational, conceptual, and relational environments exert a profound influence—not only on the individual's personality, steering it toward illicit behavior, but also on a structural and educational memory that affects the recurrence, repetition, severity, and persistence of deviant conduct, as well as the prospects for rehabilitation⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ Section 5(1)(e) of Government Decree No. 383/2016 (2 December)

⁴⁵ Kajó, Cecília (2022) Az állatvédelmi bírság speciális és generális prevenciók hatásáról [On the specific and general preventive effects of animal welfare fines], *Jegyző és Közigazgatás*, 2022/4, p. 22 or Árva, Zsuzsanna (2025) The Limits of ne bis in idem in Administrative Matters. *Krytyka Prawa*. Vol. 17, No. 2, <https://doi.org/10.7206/kp.2080-1084.770>, pp. 16–18.

⁴⁶ Cliza, M.-C., Ulariu, C.-C., Iancu, E.-A., & Boghirnea, I. (2026). Programmatic legal mechanisms and the multifaceted social inferences of the principle of proportionality in Romanian legislation, integrated into the international context. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 16(4), 1657–1685. <https://doi.org/10.35295/osls.iisl.2602>

Rather, the appropriate approach is for the authorities to prescribe specific animal welfare measures, for which there is a wide range of tools at their disposal. Such measures include, amongst others, an order to change the conditions of keeping and to establish stricter conditions of keeping; an order to carry out specific construction work to ensure the animal's appropriate and safe accommodation and to prevent it from escaping; or an order requiring the animal keeper to perform, tolerate or cease a specific act.⁴⁷

In the case of an enforceable decision – that is, a decision in which the party subject to the obligation has failed to comply with the obligation set out therein –⁴⁸ enforcement must be ordered, which the animal welfare authority that issued the decision will carry out by means of an order that may be challenged by a separate legal remedy. This applies whether it concerns failure to pay a fine or failure to comply with any other measure.

A separate aspect of the procedure is the enforcement of the decision, which, in the case of animal welfare decisions, is the responsibility of the state tax authority – namely, the National Tax and Customs Administration (NAV) – in accordance with the general rules. At this point, we move outside the scope of the Animal Protection Act, as the NAV acts in accordance with Act CLIII of 2017 on enforcement proceedings to be carried out by the tax authority.

In the event of non-payment of a fine, the amount due is subject to tax enforcement as a public debt in the same way as taxes, during which enforcement measures are taken against the liable party's income and bank account; indeed, in certain cases, attachment may also take place. These procedural steps are carried out in their entirety by the NAV⁴⁹.

The situation is different if the liable party fails to carry out a specific measure, in which case the tax authority applies the rules governing the enforcement of that particular measure. In such cases, in order to precisely define the measure to be carried out, the tax authority may call upon the animal welfare authority to assist, and the authority so requested is obliged to comply.⁵⁰ One might consider a case where enforcement proceedings are underway regarding the putting down of a dangerous dog, but the tax authority's officials are unable to identify the animal in question because several dogs are kept at the premises in

⁴⁷ See also: Chapter VIII/A of the Animal Protection Act

⁴⁸ Section 132 of the Ákr.

⁴⁹ Cîrmăciu D., *Appeal procedure of fiscal administrative acts. The mandatory preliminary appeal procedure*, în revista Journal of Legal and Social Order, no. 1 (2022), Pro Universitaria Publishing House, Bucharest, 2022, pp. 55-56; <https://ijlso.ccdsara.ro/international-journal-of-legal-a/article/view/64>

DOI:<https://doi.org/10.55516/ijlso.v1i1.64>; see also Cîrmăciu D., *Considerații privind aparatul fiscal din România*, Revista Facultății de Drept Oradea, no. 1/2019, Pro Universitaria Publishing House, Bucharest, 2019, pp. 14-15.

⁵⁰ Section 122(7) of Act CLIII of 2017.

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question, and they do not have a transponder (microchip) reader. It is entirely clear that the involvement of an official veterinary officer will be required here.

Unlike the enforcement of fines, the implementation of specific measures often involves actions that cannot be delayed. Consider, for example, the closure of an illegal animal shelter on animal welfare grounds. In such cases, officials do everything in their power during the inspection to persuade the animal keeper to cooperate, as a failure to do so could lead to a delay that could cost the animals their lives. In the absence of cooperation from the party subject to the order, the delay could run to several weeks or even months, in accordance with the rules governing tax enforcement. Normally, enforcement proceedings commence on the basis of the enforcement order, which initially relies on the debtor's voluntary compliance; in other words, the client is called upon to do so. In my view, the success rate of such attempts in animal welfare proceedings may be very low, given that the animal welfare authority has already tried on several occasions, both verbally and in writing, to persuade the person in question to cooperate. In the absence of voluntary compliance, a procedural fine is imposed, and indeed, this must be attempted on two occasions. The aim here is to apply more tangible, more easily enforceable – and thus more painful – financial pressure, provided the person in question has enforceable income or assets. Only after all this can the actually prescribed action be carried out.

Returning to our example – namely, the clearance of an illegal animal shelter – it becomes clear that this procedural framework is not suited to carrying out such a task quickly and efficiently. In day-to-day practice, therefore, the animal welfare authority maintains close, often informal, contact with the tax authority so that they can jointly carry out the task as quickly as possible. This is also facilitated by the fact that the National Tax and Customs Administration's (NAV) financial inspectors are authorised to use coercive measures, which go far beyond the powers of an animal welfare officer or an official veterinary surgeon.

At the same time, in practice, enforcement will not always be successful despite all official measures. This may occur in cases where the specified action can only be carried out by the party subject to the obligation, a typical example being an obligation to undertake training. It is entirely clear that this cannot be enforced against the will of the party subject to the obligation. In such cases, if procedural fines also fail to produce results, enforcement will be discontinued.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis carried out in this study, it can be clearly stated that the official animal welfare proceedings conducted by district offices constitute one of the most important sub-areas of the animal welfare institutional system. In my view, the appropriateness of this choice of topic is further supported by the fact that the procedures examined relate both to the general principles of administrative law and to the specific problems of day-to-day law enforcement.

Based on the interrelationships explored in this study, it can be concluded that the effectiveness of the application of animal welfare law is not currently limited primarily by a lack of substantive legal rules; rather, it is the fragmentation of the procedural and organisational frameworks that causes difficulties.

The multi-agency nature of the animal welfare regulatory system cannot in itself be regarded as a problem. As demonstrated in the study, the allocation of multiple jurisdictions could, within an appropriate regulatory framework, even serve to ensure a rational division of tasks. In practice, however, it is precisely at this point that the most significant anomalies arise. If it is unclear to a client whether the district office, the notary or another authority has the power to act in a given matter, this in itself leads to a weakening of legal certainty. In my view, it is particularly the partly overlapping and partly divergent powers between the district office and the notary that cause uncertainty. The same can be said of the rules on jurisdiction, which partly overlap. Moreover, this problem is not a recent one, as it stems partly from a long-standing structural feature which did not cease to exist with the establishment of the district offices, but was merely incorporated into a new organisational framework.

Another important finding of the study is that animal welfare matters fit entirely within the procedural logic of the Ákr., yet the application of this logic in the area under examination also entails a number of specific difficulties. This is particularly true of the enforcement of fundamental principles. Officiality, legality, efficiency and good faith provide a framework of fundamental principles which are clear in theory but often give rise to difficulties of interpretation in practice. This is clearly evident, for example, in cases where a suspicion of animal cruelty would require immediate action. In such cases, the authority must act swiftly, whilst at the same time ensuring that it proceeds impeccably with regard to gathering evidence, drawing up reports, providing the opportunity to make statements, and protecting the rights of those involved. In my view, this is where it becomes most apparent that the administrative work of animal welfare authorities is not simply a matter of applying legislation, but rather an activity involving significant professional, human and organisational demands.

It is important to note that the issues of a client's legal status and capacity to be a party to proceedings are not merely of technical significance in the cases under review. The livestock keeper, as the most typical client, is indeed easily identifiable in the majority of cases. However, the distinction between the livestock keeper and the owner, the potential role of legal entities as carers or supervisors, and the ex lege client status of civil society organisations create a far more complex situation. The procedural role of civil society organisations is significant not only from the perspective of safeguarding interests, as they can also play an irreplaceable role in uncovering latent infringements of the law. At the same time, it has become clear that the status of a client and the possibility of subsequent participation in litigation do not necessarily coincide. I consider the

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issue of legal capacity to be a problem of similar significance. The procedural status of minors or persons under guardianship raises practical uncertainties which may directly affect the effectiveness of the proceedings.

The actual effectiveness of administrative proceedings is not evident at the stage of decision-making, but rather at the stage of enforcement, which goes beyond the provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act. Although the regulatory framework for enforcement is formally adequate, practice remains uncertain in many cases. This is particularly evident in the enforcement of specific actions, such as the removal and rehoming of animals, or measures requiring specialised professional assistance. The effectiveness of enforcement depends to a large extent on cooperation between the animal welfare authority and the tax authority. In some cases, it is also clear that, despite all efforts, enforcement cannot lead to complete success.

In view of all this, the primary focus of improving animal welfare authority procedures at district office level should not be the introduction of further substantive legal provisions or sanctions. Rather, it is justified to make the existing system simpler, clearer and easier to operate in day-to-day law enforcement. In this context, it appears necessary to clarify the rules on powers and jurisdiction, to strengthen specialist professional support for case officers, to ensure a more consistent approach to issues relating to the legal status of clients, and to organise enforcement cooperation more effectively.

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