

Signalling faults disrupt NEL services

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The Straits Times, 9 September 2015

Breakdown during morning peak hours affects 35,000, in fourth major incident on NEL this year

About 35,000 commuters on their way to work just after 8am yesterday were hit by a major breakdown on the North East Line (NEL). It was the fourth incident that lasted more than 30 minutes this year on the 12-year-old line.

Operator SBS Transit said a signalling glitch at 7.08am affected service between Sengkang and Punggol stations. It was fixed at about 7.20am.

But another developed at 8.09am, hitting morning peak-hour commuters using Punggol, Sengkang, Buangkok and Hougang stations hardest. The disruption lasted more than two hours.

When The Straits Times visited Sengkang station at around 10.15am, there was no service on the north-bound track. Trains on the south- or city-bound track were running intermittently between Punggol and Buangkok stations, and service was later extended to Hougang.

Sales manager George Ow, 55, said he left his home at 7.45am and was still figuring out how to get to work in Bukit Batok when he spoke to The Straits Times at 10.30am at Sengkang station. "The queue for the buses is very long," he said.

Longer Stops at Stations

The train stopped for around five minutes at two or three stations. I'm lucky because I live just a few stops away.

PSYCHOLOGIST TAN JUN LIN, who boarded the train at Farrer Park station at about 8.25am to go to work in Outram. The journey, which usually takes 15 minutes, was almost twice as long.

Brand manager Fairshyan Chong, 30, who was at Sengkang station at about 10.20am, said she was alerted to the breakdown by her husband much earlier, but thought it would have been resolved by then.

"I tried calling for a cab for over an hour but couldn't get one," she said. "And where I work in Ubi, I don't have a bus."

While SBS estimates that the incident affected 35,000 passengers in Sengkang and Punggol, as well as those transferring from the Sengkang-Punggol LRT, it also hit commuters farther down the line.

Psychologist Tan Jun Lin, 33, boarded the train at Farrer Park station at about 8.25am to go to work in Outram. The 15-minute journey was almost twice as long.

"The train stopped for around five minutes at two or three stations," Ms Tan said. "I'm lucky because I live a few stops away."

SBS said service resumed at 10.28am - nearly 3 1/2 hours after the first glitch occurred.

But at 11am at Serangoon station, announcements continued to warn commuters of longer travelling times. SBS said it was an error made by staff on the ground.

Meanwhile, commuters said the bus bridging services deployed by SBS were confusing.

Civil servant Sim Soon How, 65, who was going to take the train from Punggol to Sengkang, said he was directed to hop on a free shuttle bus service.

It took him on a roundabout trip to Hougang, before going to Buangkok and then to Sengkang.

"I wasted my time. If I had taken a normal bus service, 83, from Punggol, I would have reached Sengkang in 10 to 15 minutes," he said.

Border security officer Bella Juremi, 23, who was going home after a 12-hour overnight shift, was in Hougang to catch a train to Punggol - a six-minute journey.

But it took about 20 minutes on the free shuttle.

The 20km NEL accounts for 13 per cent of Singapore's total MRT network length but it experienced three out of seven major breakdowns in the first half of this year. The rest were on the North-South, East-West and Circle lines.

Senior research fellow Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies said that in the light of the current hustings, the latest incident could be a reminder to some voters of the negative sentiment surrounding the transport system.

"But it is not a new issue," she added. "It will not be solved overnight and it has been acknowledged by the PAP Government, LTA (Land Transport Authority) and operators as something they will work hard to address."

Dr Koh also noted that Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew, who had said the frequency of breakdowns was unacceptable, has resigned. This is seen by "some people as the Transport Minister taking the rap for the situation".

The crowd inside Hougang MRT station at 10.24am yesterday. SBS Transit said service resumed at 10.28am - nearly 3 1/2 hours after the first glitch occurred.