S MRT should position itself as principally an engineering and operations company, the Committee of Inquiry (COI) said in its concluding statements.

More attention should be given to the maintenance regime, given that the NSEWL (North-South and East-West Lines) is ageing and the added strain due to increasing ridership.

The COI added that the two train disruptions are to be viewed as "an opportunity to undertake a more fundamental review of its maintenance approach to achieve maintenance excellence".

Transport experts agreed.

Dr Lee Der Horng, transport researcher at the National University of Singapore, thinks that SMRT should be accountable to the commuters rather than to their shareholders.

He said: "Although they are a public listed company, they are running a public service. The trains are a critical element in the daily lives of many commuters."

Responding to the COI’s report, an SMRT spokesman said that the December incidents were caused by a confluence of factors.

She said: "SMRT has operated a comprehensive maintenance regime in the past, regularly validated by LTA (Land Transport Authority), which has served us well and placed SMRT among the top performing metro operators, as evidenced by international benchmarking studies and testimonies from the experts at the COI hearings."

SMRT also acknowledged the challenges of running an ageing MRT system, coupled with the higher strain from increased train trips to cater to a rapidly increasing ridership.

Said the spokesman: "Whilst SMRT has been trying to address this, quite clearly, there are areas we can improve in our maintenance and monitoring regime and our work processes."

Since the December incidents, she added, SMRT has been collaborating with LTA to implement various initiatives to improve service reliability and incidence response.

Improvements

The improvements included many of the recommendations set out in the COI report.

In some other areas, they have even gone beyond the COI recommendations, said SMRT.

The spokesman said: "We will review the COI recommendations to take in further enhancement measures as appropriate, in conjunction with LTA."

SMRT also thanked commuters for their patience and understanding as it worked at its improvements.

"We will improve and serve the commuters better," the spokesman said.

When contacted, former SMRT CEO Saw Phaik Hwa said that the report is thorough and comprehensive.

She said that she was glad that the LTA and SMRT are working closely together.

Dr Park Byung Joon, who heads the master’s programme in urban transport management at SIM University, said: "The tone of the COI is not accusing. It is focused on the future, rather than placing the blame on any particular party."